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"JOHN! JOHN!" HE CALLS FAINTLY, BUT A FIT OF COUGHING WARNS HIM TO DESIST.

Captain Arizona,

The King Pin of Road-Agents;

OR,

Patent-Leather Joe's Big Game.

A ROMANCE OF WILD MOUNTAIN LIFE.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "PATENT-LEATHER JOE," "TIGER DICK," "ALWAYS ON HAND," "A HARD CROWD," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BAGGED BY A PETTICOAT.

"GENTS, I'm clean bu'sted!"

"Pard—shake!"

"Sure, Jimmie Madden's the third wan av the unlucky pair!"

"Ha! ha! That's one of your bulls, Jimmie. But, seriously, we must make a raise."

"L'ade the way me bowld captain! Bedad, we'll folly yez."

"Will you, Golconda?"

"You bet!"

"All right! Gentlemen, all *chassez*!"

The scene was a wild gorge in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, near the line of the old Overland stage route. Above the peaks gleamed white in the sunlight, while the lower depths of the passes were lost in black shadows, from which sprung the funereal pines.

The speakers were three men, all of them mounted, one on a superb iron-gray gelding which pawed the ground, rolled its fiery eyes, and tossed his head proudly.

This, evidently the leading spirit, was a man of forty years of age, yet with an elegance of build, rather below the medium stature, which deceived most people into thinking him not more than thirty. He was a dashing fellow, with the dare-devil looking out of his bold black eyes. His recklessness had won him the *sobriquet* of Arizona of the Iron Heart. Those who knew him best called him a "wicked"—that is to say, *dangerous*—man.

As for his comrades, Golconda Saul was a rough and tough mountainman, and Jimmie Madden—well, his "iligant" brogue spoke for itself!

Their purpose formed by the foregoing brief dialogue, these three men dashed through the mountain passes, until they came out upon the regular stage route, which they followed to a point where an abrupt curve was bordered on either hand by a dense undergrowth, into which they disappeared as if by a preconcerted plan.

For an hour deep silence reigned, broken at last by the rattle of wheels, the clatter of iron-bound hoofs on the rocky way, and the ringing crack of a stage-driver's whip, like the report of a pistol.

The Overland coach swept round the curve.

A solitary horseman, masked, and with a carbine leveled from his shoulder, blocked the way.

As if by magic, two more, also masked and armed to the teeth, sprung into view on either side of the road.

"Halt!" commanded the leader of the road-agents.

"Boss, I hear you—*every time*!" replied the stage-driver, yielding so prompt an obedience that his leaders reared and pawed the air, while his wheelers, settled back on their haunches, had the harness nearly pulled over their heads.

"Hello! What's the matter?" demanded a voice from inside the coach, as it came to a standstill.

Waiting for no explanation, the speaker thrust his head through the coach window, to see for himself.

Bang! went the carbine.

The owner of the head jerked it back out of sight, minus a lock of hair and a hat, and plus a sound bump, which it received from the top of the window frame in its precipitate retreat.

"Inquisitiveness made all the trouble in the world," said Arizona, as he rode up to the side of the coach. "My dear sir, leave that weakness where it first manifested itself to the woman—"

But the sentence was never completed.

At that instant Arizona gained a complete view of the inside of the coach, and saw that which checked the jest on his lip.

Not the wizen-faced old gentleman, who looked as if he had spent his life hovering over his precious gold, and pinching the pennies before he let them slip through his fingers, until his back was bent, his little eyes weak and watery, and his thin hands tremulous with avaricious eagerness, and who now fumed with mingled indignation and affright:

"Well, sir!—well, sir! What is the meaning of this outrage? Do you know who I am, sir? I am Stephen Rensalier, the San Francisco millionaire! Do you think that you can attempt *my* life, sir, with impunity? And what right have you to stop this coach by force and arms? We'll see if this is a land of brigandage! I'll have the law of you, sir!—I'll have the law of you!"

But to him Arizona deigned not a second look. It was the lady who fixed his gaze.

Was she young? Yes—not more than four or five and twenty. Beautiful? Yes, again, so far as regularity of feature, clearness of eye, fairness of complexion, and roundness of form can make a woman beautiful. She seemed to have womanly gentleness and grace too, when she smiled. But when her eyes flashed she looked as if she had the courage of half a dozen men, and could be dangerous if she chose.

At sight of her Arizona exclaimed within himself:—

"Good heavens! my beloved sister whom I have not seen since she romped in short dresses! She gave promise of being a clipper even then; and these ten years have made her superb! But what in all the freaks of fickle fortune brings her into this part of the world? I'll discover without betraying myself. Perhaps she might not feel flattered by a road-agent claiming relationship!"

His plans were formed and acted upon at once.

"Here, my man!" he cried roughly to the old gentleman, "get out of this coach and mount the box!"

"What, sir? *My man!*" Is Stephen Rensalier to be ordered about like a lackey by the first ruffian he chances to meet in—"

For reply, Arizona opened the coach door, reached through, seized the millionaire by the coat-collar, and with a mighty wrench, jerked him clear out into the road.

"Boys, go through him, and toss him up on the box," he said, coolly, to his followers.

They obeyed the first part of the order promptly and scientifically; but Mr. Rensalier, having had a taste of Arizona's mettle, mounted the box without assistance or further protest.

"Hallo! what have we here? Canned fruit! Just what I want," said Arizona, reaching under one of the seats.

"I beg your pardon, sir. Those are mine," said the lady, who now spoke for the first time, in a clear, firm voice, which had no trace of fear.

"Sorry, ma'am. Don't want to rob you, but must have two cans of some sort. Excuse me, if I confiscate these.

"Men, open the cans, and dump the dainties!"

In silence the lady saw the fruit, to have which carried in the coach, she had paid an extravagant price, emptied on the ground.

Then Arizona turned to the gentleman whose spirit his vigorous action had not altogether broken.

"Mr. Rensalier, did you ever belong to a brass band?"

"A brass band, sir?"

"Exactly. A brass band."

"No, sir! I never did belong to a brass band!" was the indignant reply.

"I was in hopes that you had," said Arizona, coolly. "However, it will not take long to learn to play the cymbals—at least tolerably well. Sorry that we have not the latest approved pattern. But here are two tin cans which will answer for want of better. Please give us a specimen of your skill, sir."

"Lieutenant, pass up the cans to Mr. Rensalier."

"What!" cried the old gentleman in dismay and indignation. "Make a fool of myself by beating two cans together for the amusement of a pack of mountain outlaws?"

"You'll be a bigger fool if you don't," said Arizona. "I should think that you would see that I am not a man to be trifled with."

"Better obey orders!" suggested the stage-driver, grinning. "That's the way they run things in this hyar country—thar's no two ways about it!"

Mr. Rensalier consigned the country, its inhabitants, and their customs to a torrid clime; but he took the cans and began to beat them together—rather faintly, it must be confessed.

"Louder!" commanded Arizona.

Mr. Rensalier swore; but obeyed.

"Still louder! I never saw a man with such weak muscles!"

Gritting impotent oaths between his teeth, Mr. Rensalier beat the cans with desperate energy.

"That will do, sir," said his tormentor. "You display considerable musical taste. This leads me to hope that you know how to sing."

"Well, sir, you will be disappointed there. I do not know how to sing!"

"Oh, nonsense, my dear sir! You look like one of these fatherly old fellows—pillars of the church, you know, and all that sort of thing. Come, sir! favor us with a hymn. Let me see. From Greenland's Icy Mountains. That's it! Come, sir, strike up!" urged the inexorable road-agent.

"I'll die first!" shouted his victim.

"My men!" commanded Arizona in a stern, ringing voice, "ef yonder chorister does not begin to sing by the time I have counted three, riddle him with bullets! Are you ready?"

"Ready, sir!" came as grave a reply as the men could command.

"Oh, sir!" shivered Mr. Rensalier, "you are not serious? You can not take life so wantonly!"

Arizona, who never repeated an order, began to count:—

"One!—two!—"

"From Greenland's icy moun-tains!" began the sufferer, in quavering tones.

"Louder!" commanded Arizona.

"From India's coral stra-and!"

"Still louder!"

"WHERE AFRIC'S SUNNY FOUNTAINS—"

"Louder! Louder!"

"ROLL DOWN THEIR GOLDEN SAND!" shrieked the infuriate old fellow, at the top of his asthmatic voice.

"You are not *much* of a singer, for a fact," admitted Arizona, when the ludicrous performance was concluded. "However, that will answer our purpose very well.

"Driver, what is your handle?"

"Waal," said the stage-driver, scratching his head with a comical leer, "the boys round hyar do call me the Wyoming Nightingale."

"Indeed?" cried Arizona, with interest. "That bids fair for your musical talent."

"Waal, I don't blow about my own shoutin'; but I reckon I kin make a racket that 'u'd scare buffalors! But I never done no singin' in nary church, boss, ye onderstand," said the Wyoming Nightingale, hesitating.

"Oh, that don't matter. I'm easily pleased. Strike up! One! two! three!—sing!" said Arizona, beating time like a singing-master.

The Nightingale drew in a deep breath which seemed to fill his lungs like a blacksmith's bellows; then he burst into song, making the rocks re-echo.

"Sally come up! Sally come down!
Sally come twist yer heel around!"

Even Arizona's authority could not restrain his followers; but unabashed by the rounds of laughter and applause—indeed, he enjoyed it—the Wyoming Nightingale sung on to the end of his spirited lay.

While this uproar was at its height, Arizona leaped from his horse and secured it at the back of the coach.

"My dear Nightingale," he said, "you are a man after my own heart. But I shall have to ask you to put on only a half-head of steam, lest you drown the voice of your fellow choris-

ter in the duet I intend you to sing. Now crack up your horses, and let the band play!"

Arizona leaped into the coach; the stage driver sent his long whip-lash flying through the air like a lariat, until its end seemed to explode just over the heads of his leaders; and away they whirled, the cool road-agent sitting *tete-a-tete* with the lady, the sight of whom had affected him so markedly, while Mr. Rensalier, boiling with wrath, wheezed "Greenland's Icy Mountains," and the Wyoming Nightingale, enjoying the frolic, bellowed "Sallie come up!—Sallie come down!"

Looking after them, Golconda Saul said:

"Bagged by a petticoat, by thunder!"

But Arizona's purpose was plain. He wished to talk to the lady without being overheard.

CHAPTER II.

A MILLION IN THE POT.

THERE was a half-smile on the lady's face, as she listened to the strange serenade Mr. Rensalier and the Wyoming Nightingale were executing from the top of the stage; and she peered curiously at the masked road-agent, who coolly placed himself on the seat facing her.

"Madam," he said at once, yet politely, "while our somewhat crude entertainment is in progress, would you object to my asking you a few questions about yourself?"

"Not at all, sir," replied the lady, with perfect self-possession. "You have such an original way of doing things, I doubt not that in the role of an interviewer you will prove as amusing to me as to yourself. However, I warn you that I shall use my own discretion about answering."

"Oh! certainly, madam. I trust that I shall ask nothing impertinent. Would you object to telling me your name?"

"Not at all. It is Hortense Rensalier. Do you care to know my age?" she asked, with a quiet smile.

But Arizona was too much astonished to notice this pleasantry.

"Rensalier!" he cried, in thought. "By the little God of Love! if she hasn't married that old rack-of-bones who is wheezing like a broken-winded hand-organ out there on the box! Ho! ho! ho! she's a true Ashurst! A million! She brought a good price! But, by Jove! she's worth it!"

Aloud he said, with a great show of embarrassment and regret:

"Madam—Mrs. Rensalier—indeed, I beg your pardon! Believe me, had I suspected Mr. Rensalier's relationship to one so fair as yourself, I would not for the world have put upon him so ridiculous an indignity! How can I show—"

But the lady interrupted him with a peculiar smile.

"You are somewhat in error, sir," she said.

"Mr. Rensalier is my uncle, not my husband."

"Your uncle!" cried Arizona. "My unlucky star is surely in the ascendant! How could I make so stupid a blunder, when your youth sufficiently forbade the former relationship? I open my mouth but to give offense and make apology!"

But to himself he thought:

"The devil! if not by marriage, how comes she by the name of Rensalier? and where did she scare up such an uncle? I can swear that the Ashursts have no such connection. The plot thickens! What the deuce does it all mean?"

But the lady had her reflections, too.

"Yes," she thought, "why *did* he jump at so improbable a conclusion, when the natural inference would have been that Mr. Rensalier was my father? Does he know me, I wonder?" she added, shrewdly. "If only that mask were removed!"

Aloud she went on to explain:

"To be exact, Mr. Rensalier is my uncle rather by courtesy than in fact, being a cousin of my father's. He came West ten years ago to seek his fortune, and was supposed to be dead, until two months since I received intelligence of his whereabouts and an invitation to make my own home while surrounding his old age with domestic comforts."

"Hallo! hallo!" reflected Arizona—"her father's cousin! Who, by all that is wonderful, but Uncle Steve! old Uncle Steve, the sharper! Ha! ha! I don't wonder that he dropped the name of Ashurst when he emigrated, and had the fair Hortense do the same! By Jove! it had unpleasant associations for him! And having 'made his pile,' the old fellow has begun to hanker after 'domestic comforts,' has he? Ha! ha! to have comfort of any kind he'll have to sear his old leather conscience!"

But keeping these thoughts to himself, Arizona said to the lady:

"So, so! an old Croesus with no immediate heirs! Miss Rensalier, I congratulate you on your prospects."

"Not quite so fast, sir. He has a daughter."

"Indeed? Lucky girl! Quite young no doubt, since she cannot keep her father's house."

"Claire must be seventeen."

"Claire!—Claire Rensalier?" cried the road-agent, in unmistakable astonishment.

"Do you know her?" asked the lady, quickly, more than ever longing for a glimpse behind that baffling mask.

"No—no," stammered Arizona, recovering himself. "How should I? The name struck me as rather pretty—that is all."

Thought the lady:

"You are deceiving me, my dashing road-agent!"

And she was right; for these were Arizona's private reflections:

"Claire Rensalier! Bless my lucky star if it isn't the little beauty I fished out of the drink last summer, at the young ladies' seminary near Frisco! The bewitching Lady Claire falls out of her boat into the treacherous waters of the lake! Bold Percy Montcalm alone hears her scream, dashes into the flood, and snatches her from cruel death! And, at the cost of a ducking, Miss Claire has a thrilling adventure and a handsome lover, just like the heroine in her favorite novel. And to think that, at that moment of supreme happiness, I should get into a row with the county sheriff, and have to cut and run from the too pressing attentions of a Vigilance Committee, leaving my darling to mourn the unexplained desertion of her hero!"

Having learned all that he wished to know, Arizona now stopped the coach, saying:

"I thank you for your courtesy, and apologize again for affronting your uncle. As our paths diverge here, you will pardon me if I take my leave—reluctantly, I assure you. At some future time I hope to meet you under more favorable circumstances."

"But how shall I know you?" asked the lady, her curiosity evidently strongly piqued. "Surely, you will not go without showing me your face, or telling me your name?"

"I will apprise you when the time comes. But for the present, pardon me once more, if I make so poor a return for your frankness."

And, bowing, he stepped from the coach, released Mr. Rensalier from his uncongenial occupation with an apology which did not at all soothe that gentleman's ruffled feelings, mounted his horse and galloped away, leaving Miss Rensalier to speculate fruitlessly on his identity and the cause of his interest in her.

"So!" he said, aloud, when he was out of ear-shot of the stage, "old Uncle Steve has struck it rich, and turned up with a cool million in his trousers-pocket! And my fascinating sister has set her cap for it; for, if she did not mean to marry his money-bags, trust her not to bury her charms in the West! And Uncle Steve—the toothless old fossil!—will fall into her net and never know that he is caught—until afterward!"

"But shall I leave her to entangle this gudgeon in the meshes of her silken hair? A million in the pot! By Jove! it's a game worth the playing. This mountaineering is a dog's life. Why shouldn't I be a respectable gentleman? I could be anything with a million! And it's waiting for me at the hands of this little seventeen-year-old angel. By Jove! it sha'n't go begging!"

"My lovely sister, you lay your snares for the old man and I'll cultivate the charming daughter! And let's see who makes the pot!"

From his pocket he drew a placard, which read:

"\$500 REWARD!!!

WILL BE PAID BY THE

SHERIFF OF ALAMEDA COUNTY,

FOR THE BODY,

DEAD OR ALIVE!!

OF THE MAN KNOWN AS

PATENT-LEATHER JOE."

And gazing at this notice of outlawry, Arizona of the Iron Heart laughed:

"Ha! ha! ha! That means me! But, my dear Mr. Sheriff, right under your official nose I am about to enter upon the *big* game of my life, with A MILLION IN THE POT!"

Then from directly overhead, as if from the very heavens, came the savage words:

"Yes, that means you, Patent-leather Joe! But you have more to fear than the sheriff, or the Vigilantes! You must meet the vengeance of a man who has sworn to hunt you to the grave for his father's death and his mother's wrongs! *Die!* murderer of friendship and betrayer of innocence—DIE!"

CHAPTER III.

THE VENDETTA.

WHEN his soliloquy was interrupted by a voice coming as if out of the air, he who had won the *sobriquet* of the Iron Heart turned ghastly with pallor. They who had seen him face death without the quiver of a muscle—indeed, with a jest on his lips—would not have recognized him now.

He was riding along the ordinary stage road, where it followed a ledge half-way up the face of a cliff, with a perpendicular wall of rock on one side, and a sheer precipice of hundreds of feet on the other.

Looking up, he discovered riding along another narrow shelf, not more than twenty feet above his head, a beardless boy, certainly on the youthful side of twenty.

The latter was forcing his horse to keep close to the edge of the shelf that supported him, so that he could look over and see the man below. His face was white with fury, the dark eyes blazing hatred, the white teeth showing savagely.

In either hand he held a cocked pistol; and when he had hurled his fierce denunciation, he opened a series of fusilades from his double battery, firing as rapidly as he could handle the weapons.

The very intensity of his hatred defeated its object; for the motion of his horse and the use of both hands in simultaneous discharges rendered his aim uncertain.

But the effect on Patent-leather Joe—we call him by his older title because this enmity came out of his past life, before he had adopted the name of Arizona—was wonderful. His jaw dropped, his eyes distended with terror, and his face became fairly livid. From his ashen lips fell a name in a husky whisper:

"Flash Lightning!"

Then, as a bullet ranged diagonally across his breast from the shoulder downward, scorching the flesh in its fiery track, he shivered as if he already felt the touch of the chill hand of death, and with a yell of terror dug his spurs into his horse's flanks, and dashed madly along the perilous way, like one fleeing a legion of demons!

He of the iron heart was suddenly transformed into the veriest coward! Who could explain this strange phenomenon?

Unsuccessful in his first attempt on the life of his enemy, and furious at his failure, Flash Lightning dashed hotly in pursuit, at the imminent risk of his neck; for the ledge on which he rode was narrow and very irregular. But in his mad thirst for revenge he took no thought of self. Giving his horse the rein, he used both hands in reloading his empty revolvers.

"I have followed him for three years!" he hissed between his set teeth. "He has doubled like a fox, and eluded my pursuit. Now that I have run him to earth, he shall not escape me!"

When the firing ceased, Patent-leather Joe seemed to pluck up sufficient courage to look at his pursuing foe.

Flash Lightning's body was hidden by the rock, but his head was visible above the edge of the shelf.

"A lucky shot might end all this!" reflected

Patent-leather Joe, with a wild thrill of hope. "For three years that young devil has im-bittered my life with a constant menace. He is the only living thing that I fear!"

And a shudder showed that he did fear this boy.

"Why—why do I fear him with so unreasonable a cowardice? He is but a *boy*; and no *man* can boast that he ever blanched my cheek! Had I but the nerve to face him, I might kill him, and end it all. But, ah! it is his father's face that unmans me! Shall I ever forget it? That horror that shapes itself in every fantastic cloud, that flits noiselessly in every haunting shadow, that pursues me relentlessly awake, and drives me shuddering from sleep—that horror will never clear me until death—perhaps not then!

"But this foolhardy boy, with his trumpery vendetta—a lucky shot! I might rid myself of him! But, no! How can I slay the man or boy who is destined to lay me by the heels? The murdered father finds his avenger in the son. I cannot escape the award of fate!"

The superstition of the gambler crowded upon him with paralyzing force. But out of this very despair sprung up a sudden furious resolve.

"I defy Heaven and earth, and the powers of darkness!" he cried aloud. "I spit in the face of fate!"

And while that frenzy was upon him, he raised his revolver and fired.

A wild, almost maniac, yell, vibrated with mingled fear and triumph, escaped his lips at the success of his shot.

The head at which he had fired disappeared a moment. Then a limp body came hurtling over the edge of the upper shelf, to fall with a dull thud in the road behind him.

"He is dead! He is dead! I am free—free! —FREE!" fairly yelled Patent-leather Joe.

But he shuddered from head to foot, and, not daring to look back, goaded his horse to even greater fleetness, as if to escape the following ghost of the boy he had just shot!

As the road over which the running fight took place followed a curve in the mountain-side, the duel was in plain sight of the occupants of the coach, which was more slowly following the way traversed by Patent-leather Joe's fleet gelding.

The Wyoming Nightingale took the thing very philosophically, with no particular partiality toward either of the combatants, and only regretting that there was no one with whom he could bet on the result.

Mr. Rensalier, who had been familiarized with such scenes in earlier life, only anathematized Patent-leather Joe, and hoped that the fortunes of battle might favor his antagonist.

Hortense was strongly excited, for life-struggles were new to her; but she betrayed none of the weakness and fear common to her sex. Only when the boy fell from his horse, she cried:

"Oh, he has killed him!"

When the coach came up to where the limp body lay, Mr. Rensalier recognized it at once.

"Why, it is Alf Cheswick!" he said.

"Some one with whom you are acquainted?" asked Hortense.

"Well, I don't know much about him. He is one of Claire's friends. There is a kind of a flirtation between them, I believe. Some tomfoolery about an engagement. A boy and girl affair, of course."

"Oh!" exclaimed Hortense, in a peculiar tone. "Pray see if he is dead!"

The Nightingale descended from his box, and after a brief examination, said:

"I'll bet any man, woman or child that the youngster will be on his pins again in twenty-four hours!"

As there were no "takers" of this universal challenge, he went on, like a demonstrator in anatomy:

"He ketched the slug right hyar behind the year, ye see. That discombobilated his idees, an' jerked him off his hoss. But I've seen many a rap on the knowledge-box that this hyar ain't a flea-bite to; an' the galoots as ketched 'em on the fly is well an' hearty men to-day—raisin' fam'lies, some of 'em!"

"This hyar's where his hoss tickled him with his off hind foot. That's only a scratch; but when ye're gauging a man's gruel, ye've got to count all ye find in it."

"The fall down that 'scarpment didn't do him no good; but his j'int's works all O. K., an' the bones is as good as you'll find in any graveyard this side o' Frisco."

"So, ma'am," concluded the Nightingale, "ef so be you hain't afeard of the blood an' sich, that makes most women-folks skeary, we'll load him into the hearse an' dump him at Dutch Flat—which the same is the next station, ye onderstand."

"Lift him in at once," said Hortense, and herself steadied the limp body until the swaying coach reached Dutch Flat.

Here the whole party stopped over, though the accommodations were "nothing to speak of."

Mr. Rensalier needed the rest to recover from the effects of his rough treatment, both mental and physical, at the hands of the road-agent, and Hortense spent the time in nursing Alf Cheswick. His manly beauty had a strange fascination for her; and before she knew anything about him, she acknowledged to herself that she loved him. Whatever may have before been her feelings toward her cousin Claire, her jealous hatred of her now was unequivocal.

"Whether I marry Uncle Steve, or not," she reflected, "that little minx shall never have Alf Cheswick!"

Then came Alf's story.

"His name is Andrew Ashurst! He murdered my father and drove my mother to insanity! I have sworn a deadly vendetta against him and his! I will strike him and them!—at any time, in any place!—whenever and wherever fate brings them across my path!—and never stay my hand until the accursed race is exterminated!"

And Hortense Rensalier said to herself:

"That road-agent was my brother! That accounts for his interest in me."

Then growing pale to the lips, she thought:

"I love my deadliest foe; but he has no suspicion that I belong to those he hates so implacably!"

Then, after a moment's thought:

"This, at least, will serve as a means of separating him from Claire. After I am left a rich young widow, who knows!—who knows?"

These reflections showed the line along which her schemes moved.

At Dutch Flat there was a man in disguise who muttered:

"Not dead!—not dead! Why did I hope that bullet of mine could kill him? And he in love with the very girl whom I must marry to win my big game! I owe that knowledge to the Nightingale, who heard her father speak so carelessly about the 'boy and girl affair.' So I must fight him too? Well, be it so! A MILLION IN THE POT! I'd fight the world and the devil for that!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE MIDNIGHT ASSASSIN.

"He! he! he! The little Tensie that used to climb upon my knee and rummage my pockets for bon-bons! Who'd have prophesied then that to-morrow's sun would shine upon her a new-made bride?—an old man's darling!"

What an old beau he was, with his silver locks and grizzled mustache dyed a jet-black, while he rubbed his toothless gums together and smacked his flabby lips with gusto over the rare morsel of youth and beauty he had bought with his gold!

And gazing at this old wreck, wrapped close in its gorgeous dressing-gown, and sunk in the depths of a sleepy-hollow chair, with a pillow at its back, the woman who smiled so sweetly upon him the while reflected:

"Well! well! the old fools *are* the worst fools!"

But he, knowing nothing of this unflattering criticism, chuckled over his prize until he fell into a cough, and nearly shook his rickety old body to pieces, and he had to be almost carried off to bed, Hortense lovingly supporting him on one side, while his valet walked like a wooden man on the other.

Then this scheming woman, who had so nearly reached the goal of her ambition, stood alone in the middle of the room and gazed around on the luxury that was to be hers on the morrow; and a red spot glowed in either cheek, and her eyes flashed triumphantly.

"He is old and gray and wrinkled and bent; he has an old man's trot and begins to drivel in his talk; but—magic charm!—he is worth a million!" she cried, striking her hands together in a sort of exultant ecstasy. "Will I take all this wealth incumbered with such a wreck? Ay, gladly! Once within my grasp, trust me to extract the sweet and avoid the bitter!"

"And Claire, the little fool!—she has not been a straw in my path! Ha! ha! How he packed her off to school again the moment she began to sulk over the prospect of a new mamma! Yes, Miss Sulky! we'll keep you at school when I reign here! As for my interference in your love affair with Alf Cheswick, my dear, it wasn't altogether malice. I prefer that you should not marry just yet; and then, I rather like Alf myself!"

And thus rejoicing in the success of her plots, this cunning woman went to bed, with no fore-

warning that her golden dream was to have a rude awakening.

But out in the darkness crouched a man, who watched the lights in the various parts of the house go out one by one, while he muttered to himself:—

"So! my wily sister has played her cards fine! And she hasn't been at all bashful. In a short three months she has caught her old bird and plucked him ready for the matrimonial spit! She believes in striking while the iron's hot, making hay while the sun shines, and all that. Perhaps she was afraid the old fellow would drop off the hooks before she got the golden fetters on him!"

"But neither have I been idle. And if Hortense is to be married to-morrow *night*, my pretty Claire has promised to elope with me, to morrow *morning*, rather than witness the triumph of her scheming step-mother who besides winning her father away from her, has made her believe that her lover, Alf Cheswick, is false to his vows. But after all the risk I have run to win my million-dollar bride from under the very noses of sheriff and Vigilantes, she is worthless unless I can stop this marriage; for if my lovely sister ever gets old Uncle Steve in her clutches, good-by to my million! *And there is but one way to prevent her!*" added the skulking watcher, in a hoarse whisper.

As he came to that he crouched lower in the shrubbery. His face gleamed white in the darkness. His eyes glittered like coals of fire.

"It isn't like meeting a man in an open fight," he pursued. "But this helpless old wreck! It's almost as bad as putting a woman or a child out of the way!"—with a shudder of horror.

"Bah!" he whispered, presently. "It's got to be done! He may live but a few months anyway; and, by all the furies! a million will salve my conscience for the little shove I give him!"

But for all that Patent-leather Joe shuddered, as his fancy pictured the faint struggles of his helpless victim. Then he had recourse to the murderer's ally and friend—the demon that has filled prisons and loaded gibbets ever since they were devised by man for the punishment of his fellow-man.

From his pocket he drew a flask of brandy, and poured the raw liquor down his throat like water.

"That fires my quailing heart!" he muttered. "Now I am ready for anything! *And the time is come!*"

Stealthily he crept through the shrubbery, and gained a French window that opened upon the veranda from Mr. Rensalier's bedchamber. The old man slept on the ground floor, because his tottering legs were almost beyond their service for climbing stairs.

The windows yielded to Patent-leather Joe's skillful touch, and he disappeared within the house. Then all was still and dark! The wind moaned drearily and had a deathlike chill; an owl voiced a dismal hoot; from the distance came the long-drawn howl of a dog! Do dumb brutes recognize the approach of death?

But what is going forward in that room dedicated to peaceful sleep, not to murder? The old

man lies among his downy pillows and fleecy coverlets. A taper burns dimly on a little stand at the head of the bed.

The sleeper's wrinkled face, with its tremulous lips and pinched nostrils, is just visible in the faint illumination. He sleeps fitfully, starting and half-waking at times, as if disturbed by evil dreams. Has he any warning of the deadly peril that is creeping upon him?

The French window moves noiselessly open. A curtain sways gently in the night breeze thus admitted to the chamber. The taper flickers so as to leave the room almost in total darkness. A shadowy form flits in, and all is still again!

Once more the taper burns with steady glimmer. The wrinkled old face among the pillows seems drawn with lines of pain, and already to bear the impress of death. From the shelter of a curtain a pair of burning eyes glare upon it!

"My God! what a wreck he is!" mutters the intruder. "A touch! a breath! and he is done with this world! A million hanging upon so slight a chance! A million for an old man's life! A million! a million! Ha! ha! it is mine! mine!—mine!"

The assassin's eyes glitter, and his form trembles in a sort of avaricious frenzy. The last word he speaks half aloud; then, startled by his own imprudence, he shrinks from sight behind the curtain, and listens breathlessly.

The old man moves in his bed, as if the sound had half aroused him from his fitful slumbers. But soon he is quiet again.

"See how slight a thing may yet intervene," muttered the concealed assassin. "It would be just my luck to lose at the very last moment! I must take every precaution. It won't do to be recognized, if I fail."

He draws a black mask from his pocket and adjusts it to his face. Now, with his eyes gleaming through the holes, he looks even more terrible than when his white face was exposed to view.

Stealthily he peers forth! All is well! Noiselessly, on tiptoe, he creeps across the floor until he reaches the middle of the room!

The old man gasps asthmatically—strangles—awakes!—and struggles up in bed! All is discovered!

But, no! The assassin has sunk noiselessly to the floor, and crouches there concealed by the foot of the bed!

"Discovered!" darts through his brain like a flash of lightning. "Shall I spring upon him, and then, dashing from the house, trust to the speed of my horse? No! He has not seen me yet. Wait! wait! he may lie down again! If he summons any one he's a dead man! I'll never forego that million now, if I have all the world at my heels!"

And he draws a murderous-looking bowie, and holds it in readiness.

"My anodyne is beyond reach—of course!" whines the old man, peevishly. "And that confounded bell is still further! Did that rascally valet ever leave it *within* reach? No—he's too much afraid of being aroused from his sleep by it!"

"John! John!" he calls faintly; but a fit of coughing warns him to desist.

"Now, by all the furies!" mutters the assas-

sin, gathering himself ready for a spring, "it will be lucky for that scoundrel if he be a heavy sleeper; for, if he answer his master's call, he will never live to tell what he found here!"

But the valet's guardian angel preserves his slumbers unbroken.

"I ought to know better than to call," grumbles old Stephen Rensalier. "I'd stand a better chance in a deaf and dumb asylum! Confound these servants!—one has to pay them for the privilege of waiting on oneself! Now, I suppose I'll have to lie awake all the rest of the night!"

And he sinks back among his pillows with a groan of discontent.

"Ah, well!" he sighs, as he resigns himself to what he thinks is to be the last of his misfortunes, "after to-morrow Hortense—dear girl!—will be always at hand to look after my comfort!"

"After to-morrow!" chuckles the concealed murderer, as he returns his knife to his belt. "After to-morrow, my venerable friend, I lose my guess if you need either a valet, or Hortense! Every one looks out for himself in the 'high lot' where they'll plant you—after to-morrow!"

Contrary to his grumbling prediction, the old man sleeps again. Then the assassin creeps forth! Step by step he tiptoes, until he stands directly over the unconscious sleeper.

What is he about to do? He has no weapon in his hands. But his gleaming eyes speak murder of some kind!

A rattle, horrible in its suggestiveness, sounds in the old man's throat.

Hurriedly, fearing that his victim will awake again, the destroyer bends forward, and reaching across the body he is about to deprive of life, seizes a pillow!

Perhaps it is the hot breath of his murderer upon his wasted cheek, perhaps a touch, perhaps some subtle instinct of nature warning the unconscious body of the near approach of danger; but from some cause, the old man awakens again and opens his eyes.

He sees a black mask and a pair of gleaming eyes!—that is all! It is his last look on earth!

With a swoop the pillow descends upon his face, smothering the cry of mortal fear that rises to his throat! Uttering a suppressed snarl of savage ferocity, the slayer of old age throws the whole weight of his body upon it, clinging to his victim like some beast of prey to its writhing, fainting, dying quarry!

The struggle that ensues is nameless in its horror! Not a sound is heard save the faint tossing of feeble limbs and the hoarse breathing of the murderer.

At last all is still. The deed is done!

A noiseless shadow flits from the murder-haunted chamber! The homicide flies through the night! Far away a horse goes tearing along the rocky road, bearing the slayer of the father to wed the unsuspecting child!

On, on dashes the red-handed plotter, until, after mile upon mile of hard riding through the night, he stands beneath a red-wood tree, within sight of a large building which looms grimly among the trees in that densest gloom which precedes daybreak. As from the direction of

the building—the Misses Millmans' Seminary for Young Ladies—he sees a slight shadow stealing toward him, he mutters triumphantly:

"Here comes the little angel who brings a million dollars dower!"

A moment later a girl, scarcely more than a child, sinks into his arms with a frightened sob.

To gain his point Patent-leather Joe has had to imbrue his hands in blood, and is now about to break the heart of an innocent, confiding child; but little reck he as he says to himself:

"I have won the first trick in my 'big' game with A MILLION IN THE POT!"

CHAPTER V.

A WOMAN'S DEFEAT.

It is the darkest hour just before dawn. A strange, a startling sound breaks the dead stillness in the house of that awful tragedy.

Hortense Rensalier from the midst of dreamless slumber starts upright in bed, every drop of blood rushing back upon her heart and a nameless chill and numbness of fear seizing upon her.

She hears a confused clamor of men's voices mingled with the screams and wails of women.

"What is the matter? Is the house on fire?" is her first thought.

For the time she is too frightened, too bewildered, to move. She can only cower and tremble and shiver there, with clasped hands and staring eyes, shudderingly apprehensive that some nameless horror will start from the semigloom of her room and appall her shrinking vision!

She hears the tramp of hurrying feet! They are coming toward her! Up the stairs! Along the hall! At the threshold of her chamber! And with it all, that Babel of wailing voices of women!

She who has never known woman's weakness before now nearly dies of fear. What is it?—in heaven's name! What is it?

But, hark! A woman's hands are beating wildly against her door! The familiar voice of her maid calls:

"Oh! Miss Rensalier! Miss Rensalier! Come!—quick! quick!—oh, come! Oh! oh! oh! what shall we ever do?"

The voice electrifies her, and breaks the spell of paralyzing fear. She springs from her bed, and, with her heart in her throat, cries wildly:

"Celcine! Celcine!"

She turns on a full blaze of light, rushes to the door, and throws it open.

In the hall she sees a group of serving-women huddled together in affright, standing gaunt in their white night-clothes, with their disheveled hair falling about their shoulders and their eyes streaming tears, wringing their hands and uttering inarticulate sounds of distress and sympathy, while they look at her pityingly.

From among them her maid crosses the threshold, and with clasped hands and tear-drenched face raised to hers, sobs:

"Oh, ma'am!—oh! oh! how can I ever tell you?"

With an impatience born of terrible suspense,

she clutches the girl by the shoulder and shakes her, demanding sternly:

"Celcine! Celcine! what is the matter? Tell me, at once!"

"Oh, it's down there in master's room! He's dead!—dead!—dead!" moans the frightened girl, her iteration sounding like the toll of a knell.

"Dead?—dead?" repeats Hortense Rensalier.

An awful whiteness gathers about her lips. Her eyes grow round and gleam with a hard light that frightens the women into muteness. Her voice is a husky whisper.

"Yes! yes!—murdered, John says!" wails the girl; and shuddering she crosses herself and covers her eyes with her hands.

"My wrapper!" commands Hortense Rensalier, in clear, ringing tones.

She stands erect, drawn to her greatest height, with heaving breast, clinched hands, blazing eyes, distended nostrils! She is terrible in her despair!

The girl springs for the garment. The woman wraps it about her like a mantle. Then, like some olden queen going to view the dead body of her slain lord, she descends the stairs, the women huddling after her.

The half-dressed men-servants make way for her. She walks straight up to the bedside, and looks down at the purple face. She utters no cry—she sheds no tear. She turns round with her marble-white face and eyes as hard as steel.

"Who discovered this?" she asks, in metallic tones.

"Me, ma'am," says the *valet* with bowed head.

"Tell me all about it."

"It was jest this way, ma'am. I thought I heard master callin', an' got up an' come in to see if he wanted anything. He was layin' jest as you see him, ma'am, only with the pillar over his face. The winder was open like you see it now, which I know I shut it the last thing before goin' to bed. An' that's all I know about it, ma'am."

That is all there is to learn for the present. She gives a few necessary directions; then returns to her room. Through the window she can see the first gray of dawn breaking over the eastern horizon.

"And this is my wedding morn!" she says, with a hard laugh.

Then she grinds her white teeth with rage, as she hisses forth the word:

"Foiled!"

"What matters it," she pursues, after a time, "who is his murderer, or why it was done? For me, all is said in this:—*I am not his wife! I am a pauper!* And my incensed Cousin Claire will soon be here to thrust me from *her* home! I will go forth to poverty and obscurity, and she will marry Alf Cheswick and live happily ever after, like the good princess in the fairy tale!

"*Shall* she marry Alf Cheswick? Never! never! NEVER! Let her keep her paltry gold—the man she shall never have! I will kill her first! I have been foiled by an unknown hand in my scheme to get her wealth; but defeated though I am in this, she shall not triumph over me there! Let her come!—let her come! I will wring her heart until she learns to curse the gold that cannot buy her happiness!"

And choking with hysterical rage, the arch-plotter, baffled at the very moment of success, sways and falls to the floor in a swoon!

But Claire will not come to dispute the possession of her home. As we know, she has fallen into the hands of the man who will work her bitterest woe.

The sun has just appeared above the horizon when Hortense Rensalier recovers from her swoon. She rises to a sitting posture and rests her head against the window-sill, to let the cool morning breeze fan her throbbing temples. So she reviews the wreck of her fortunes, and tries to discover if anything can be saved from the ruin, and to form new plans for the future. But look at it how she may, it always comes to the same thing.

"I shall be driven forth a pauper, and Claire will triumph over me in the enjoyment of the million for which I have plotted so desperately! Oh! I could kill her! If she gets Alf too, I don't know but I may attempt it!"

Sick at heart, the defeated woman rises, to pace the room like a caged leopardess. But the confining walls seem to stifle her, and she goes down-stairs and out into the garden.

Now for the first time she notices a strange hubbub. It is caused by the voices of excited men. The suburb in which Mr. Rensalier lives is like a village. The news of the murder has spread; and the people are coming to the scene.

Hortense Rensalier feels greatly annoyed at this intrusion, of what she contemptuously calls "the mob." But before she has time for reflection, she hears a step close at hand, and, turning, stands face to face with Alf Cheswick!

CHAPTER VI.

THE DENUNCIATION.

At sight of Alf, Hortense Rensalier's heart leaps into her throat. He is the only man that ever had the power to make her pulses quicken. A wild thought comes to her.

"If he would take me in his arms and say—'I love you!'—I would give up all ambition for wealth and try to make him a loving wife!"

The thought makes her feel faint and dizzy. She looks at him with a great longing.

But his white face is hard and forbidding. His brows are bent with anger. His stern eyes have no tenderness for her.

"Am I about to receive another blow here?" she asks herself, and her heart goes down in her bosom like lead.

"Madam," says Alf Cheswick, in a voice that leaves her no hope, "I did not come here to meet you; but perhaps it is as well that chance should give me the opportunity to relieve my mind."

"Sir," replies the woman with her haughtiest air, "do you consider whom you are addressing? Let me suggest the propriety of a more courteous tone!"

"I am courteous to those who deserve courtesy!"

"I do not understand you, sir!"

"I will speak so plainly, then, that you will. When a woman becomes a mere scheming adventuress—"

"Adventuress!"

"Bah! Why palter over terms? Are you not

about to sell yourself to a man old enough to be your grandfather? But I did not mean to speak of this. I despise you too utterly to care whether you go up or down in the scale of womanhood! But from the conviction that you, and you alone, have come between Claire Rensalier and me no lying denial will dissuade me! Her coldness, her father's disfavor, date from the hour that they came under your influence!

"Now hear me, false-hearted plotter! The father you have in your treacherous clutch! Keep him! You are welcome to both the man and his money! But the daughter I am determined to save from the lies, whatever they have been, with which you have alienated her from me! *She is mine!*—and, by Heaven! I will not be robbed of her by your vile plots!"

The boy whose intensity earned for him the sobriquet of Flash Lightning is now thoroughly aroused; and the impassioned words flow from his lips like the rattle of musketry along a skirmish line.

He has told the woman that he despises her and loves her rival with a passion that nothing shall defeat. She sees that he is lost to her utterly. In that moment all her love for him turns to the gall of jealous hatred.

"I will defeat her, and crush him—this presumptuous puppy who has dared to insult me to my face!" she reflects; and instantly her plan is formed and acted upon.

As if frightened by his vehemence, she begins to back away from him.

In the heat of his anger he follows her, crying:

"Stop! You *shall* hear me out!"

Then the woman raises her voice to the shrill pitch of agonized terror, and screams:

"Help! Help! Oh, help!"

All unsuspecting of the fiendish treachery of the woman—impatient at what he supposes her weak fears—he seizes her wrist to detain her from flight, crying:

"Fool! What is the matter with you? You have no reason to fear personal violence from me!"

But, as if frenzied with terror, she struggles in his grasp, rending the air with shriek after shriek.

She has calculated well. In his passion, Alf Cheswick has not noticed the assembling of the excited people before the house. Now there is the sound of rushing feet and a Babel of alarmed voices.

"Hark! What was that?"

"A woman's scream!"

"But where did it come from?"

"From that direction, somewhar!"

"It is in the garden!"

"Come on, men!"

"For God's sake make haste!"

"Yes! yes! there may be more fiend's work afoot!"

A gleam of triumphant malice darts from Hortense Rensalier's eyes. The "mob" which she has despised she is about to dupe into becoming her ally in the accomplishment of her revenge.

While she yet struggles and screams, the garden is filled with men, pale and wild-eyed with excitement. They are formidable-looking fel-

lows, rude in dress, with unkempt, bushy beards, broad shoulders, deep chests, and brawny arms. Their rage is as unreasoning as a whirlwind or a stampede of frightened buffaloes.

"What the devil is this?" shouts one burly giant, roughly.

"The cowardly hound, to pitch onto a woman!" cries another.

"Down him! Down him!" yells half a dozen, all in a breath.

"And, without waiting for a word of explanation, poor Alf is pounced upon from all sides at once.

Madly he struggles, knowing that words are useless with that infuriated mob, but in a twinkling he is knocked down, and pounded and kicked and trampled almost into insensibility.

In the mad eagerness of every one to lay hold of him, or get a blow, when he goes down they fall over one another, piling upon him four or five deep, until he is nearly crushed and smothered. And all the while the air is loaded with shouts of rage and blasphemous execration.

At last the confused mass rises, men with their hats gone or crushed over their ears, their coats torn and pulled awry, their faces bruised, and their hands scratched and bleeding. But in their wrath, none heed the personal damage they may have received.

Last, poor Alf, dazed and aching from crown to sole, smeared with blood and dirt, and with his clothes almost torn off from him, is jerked to his feet, a burly captor holding him on either side.

He realizes that he is in an ugly scrape, but does not dream the fatal extent of his peril until the queen of plotters develops her damnable purpose.

Pointing an accusing finger at him, she cries in clear, ringing, melodramatic tones:

"I denounce Alfred Cheswick as the murderer of Stephen Rensalier!"

This, then, is the desperate revenge of an incensed woman!

CHAPTER VII.

MOBBED.

EVERYBODY is electrified by this unexpected charge.

Alf Cheswick is dumfounded!

The arch-plotter keeps on without giving them time for thought:

"Foiled in his designs on the affections of the daughter by the father repelling him as a fortune-hunter, this is his revenge! To gain money he would have beguiled a mere child; in seeking revenge he did not respect the gray hairs of helpless old age! You have just seen the climax of his cowardly villainy in this assault on a defenseless woman. If you are men, you will hang him to the nearest tree!

"Oh, help! I— Oh—"

And before any one can interfere, she sways, puts her hand to her head, gropes blindly, and falls prostrate!

Her maid, Celcine, who rushed out at the sound of her mistress's voice in those first wild screams, now casts herself on the ground beside her, filling the air with frightened cries.

It is all very cleverly done. Everybody

thinks that the beautiful woman has fainted from the reaction after this man's brutal violence. But in reality it is only the shamming of a clever actress. Hortense Rensalier knows what she is about!

A fierce yell of resentful fury rises from the crowd. In that yell Alf Cheswick is tried for his life and condemned!

"Hang him! Hang him!" runs the cry through that relentless mob, like fire through prairie grass.

The crowd sways and surges. The men who hold the prisoner are jostled and pushed from side to side, and nearly thrown from their feet, in spite of their great strength.

In vain does poor Alf shout:

"Stop! stop! I'm an innocent man. I never heard until just now that Mr. Rensalier was dead! I came here to see his daughter!"

"Bah! When everybody knows she's off to school, poor thing! That won't wash, my Christian friend!"

"But I did not know it. On my soul, I thought her at home to attend her father's wedding!"

"Which the same would have knocked you out of a cool million! Reason enough for shuttin' off the old gent's wind—eh, pardner?" derides one.

"An' that's what for you come hyar to clean out your mother-in-law!" adds another. "Thin!—deuced thin!"

"Stow the chaff, gents," cries still another. "Hyar's the thing in a nut-shell. The murderer has been traced from the winder to whar he mounted his hoss an' lit out. An' I myself seen this hyar gent ride up to the Bolton House, under an hour ago, his hoss winded an' one lather o' sweat, an' himself lookin' as if he'd been racin' from a hundred ghosts an' devils all night long—and thar's the hoss in the stable to prove it!"

"That's the cheese! He thought to blind his trail by doublin' an' comin' right back whar nobody'd think o' lookin' fer him. Oh, he's a cute one an' a bold! His kind is dog-goned dangerous to let run loose! Tie him up, I say!"

This is the signal for renewed yells. The crowd, already convinced, does not scan the evidence over closely. It wants action, not talk; and action in this case means hanging.

Alf's voice is drowned. His struggles are unavailing.

"Make way out o' hyar!" commands one of his captors; and he is dragged forward, the yelling, hooting mob crowding after, trampling the bower-beds and breaking the shrubbery, until the garden, all fair and beautiful a few minutes ago, now looks as if a herd of wild beasts had passed through it.

The prisoner is borne through the gate. A few follow, with much jostling. More leap the fence in their eagerness, until the frail ornamental paling breaks beneath the weight of numbers.

Then they go down the street, the prisoner borne rapidly along in advance, in the middle of the roadway, while those on the outskirts of the crowd scurry forward to gain the front and feast their gaze on the white, despairing face and staring eyes of the bloodstained prisoner,

As for Alf, he seemed half-stupefied. He has given over all idea of self-defense or escape. Who can tell what thoughts pass through the brain of a doomed man, when all of his kind seem frenzied, thirsting for his blood? Perhaps there is little clearness or continuity in them.

By this time they are half-way to the Bolton House. Before the tavern stands a sign-post, with an arm sticking out at the top at right angles, like the arm of a gibbet.

From this arm a sign-board used to swing, creaking dismally in the night winds, incongruous with the hospitality to which it invited man and beast. Perhaps these eerie sighs and moans were portentous of the use to which the post was to be put; for one day the board was broken off—

"To make room for another sign," says the standing joke of the place—"a sign that the folks around hyar don't stand no foolishness—an' don't ye furgit it!"

A short piece of rope—just as it was left when the dead man was cut down—still swings from the end of the arm, a standing menace to evil-doers!

The eyes of the mob have caught this horribly suggestive relic. It fires them with renewed frenzy. Their yells are more savagely vindictive than ever. They think that they are honest men, ridding the world of a vampire who has no more claim to human consideration than a wild beast or a venomous serpent!

Half-way, as we have said, to this horrible engine of man's vengeance, they are met by a man who comes running toward them, having just emerged from the stable-yard with a freshly saddled horse, and thrown the bridle-rein carelessly over a post, so that the horse is left standing directly beneath the improvised gallows.

He is below the medium height and rather slight in build; but he has a piercing, steel-blue eye, and a resolute chin. That he is "wiry, an' quick as greased lightnin', an' no fool to git away with—you hyear me?" more than one man in the crowd can bear testimony, since before now he has "jugged" the best of them when, fired by whisky and "sp'ilin' fur a fight," they have gone on the "war-path" and proclaimed themselves "chief!" This man is Sheriff Bob Bolton.

"Hallo, boys! What's this!" he cries, eagerly.

"The galoot what give old man Rensalier his send-off," replied one of Alf's captors, with just a touch of surliness.

Like many another in the crowd he doesn't exactly relish the appearance of a regularly constituted officer of the law, who may feel it his duty to interfere with this impromptu dispensation of justice, and reserve the prisoner for a court of a little less questionable authority.

"Waal, that's clever!" said the sheriff, with a seeming satisfaction. "It saves me a ride into town all for nothing. Thar's my horse in front of the hotel. In a minute more I'd been off, like a hot shot out of a shovel, for help to wind this thing up with a round turn. We've had about enough of this sort of thing around hyar! Just let me clap my hooks onto this bird!"

As a matter of course, he steps up and seizes

Alf by the right shoulder, displacing the man who has held him on that side thus far. Shaking him, he says:

"Wake up, hyar, my man! I'm Bob Bolton! I reckon you've heard of me."

Alf looks at him without interest. A change of captors is nothing to him.

The man who yielded to the sheriff without protest, answered this observation:

"You're right, boss!—this thing has gone about fur enough! But I reckon thar's men a plenty in this crowd to put this gent through the mill without no help from Frisco. Ef as be you want to take a hand in with the boys, why, of course it's all right."

There is a covert menace in this speech. The speaker thinks, and the crowd is in sympathy with him:

"Ef you try to shut down on the thing with any o' your legal business, I reckon you'll find out that one man can't stand off a crowd, when it knows what it's about jist as well as you do!"

If the sheriff understands it in this way, he says nothing, but walks on as if he were as intent as any of them upon getting the prisoner to the scene of execution.

But a moment later he trips Alf, then within the instant stumbles over the latter's feet, so that it appears as if the prisoner had tripped him; and as, in falling forward, his mouth passes close to Alf's ear, he utters a single word, which in the hubbub sounds to the others like an inarticulate ejaculation of anger, if, indeed, any one notices it at all.

But Alf has caught the sound shot, as it were, into his ear, and interpreted it:

"Run!"

The next instant the sheriff has let go his hold on Alf's arm and fallen on his face in the road.

CHAPTER VIII.

SHERIFF BOB BOLTON.

NEVER was trick more cleverly done. No one that sees it but would swear that Alf had thrown his captor by as neat a trip as they ever witnessed.

It takes Alf all unawares. Nothing is further from his thoughts than that this professional taker of criminals would connive at the escape of the man accused of the murder of old Stephen Rensalier.

But life is in the balance; he has heard the word; and his right arm is free! Like a flash of light all that benumbed stupefaction of despair leaves him, and the whole man is galvanized into vivid life and activity—every faculty is strung to the highest pitch; every muscle is like steel!

He does not stop to speculate why this man has befriended him. The fact itself is enough for the present. The whole scheme flashes upon him at once. That saddled horse was brought out, the bridle-rein thrown loosely over the post and his attention covertly called to them, that he might thus have the means of escape at hand!

The sheriff has scarcely struck the ground, when Alf Cheswick's fist shoots forth like a thunderbolt, taking his other captor just back of the ear, and felling him as if he had been struck by lightning!

Like a rocket the prisoner is off, and those immediately behind him have stumbled over the bodies of the two men already prostrate—the one by his own will, the other stunned to unconsciousness by Alf Cheswick's tremendous blow for life.

The latter, of course, does not arise; but, active as a cat, Bob Bolton is on his feet again in a twinkling, and has laid hold of the man nearest him. Is it by chance that it is the man nearest Alf also?

But the sheriff's eyes, nose and mouth are full of dust; and certainly he sputters loudly and profanely enough, and handles the man he has captured as roughly as if he were convinced that he held the prisoner who had tried to play him a scurvy trick, and was determined to teach him that no man could try to "shake" Bob Bolton without getting pretty well "shook" up himself! Indeed, something to this effect is tacked to the end of a string of rousing Western oaths.

The effect of all this is that the crowd, as a body, is bewildered. If that is the prisoner darting away like an arrow, bare-headed and with his hair flying in the wind, what is the meaning of this struggle, as if his captors were having a hard task to hold him?

So, while Alf distances the few who really recognize him, half a dozen of those who had the best chance of recapturing him are busy trying to awaken the seemingly enraged sheriff to his mistake. It takes but a moment, when he brushes the dust from his eyes and glares around at them and at the man to whom he has given some idea what it would be to pass through a thrashing machine!

Then Bob Bolton "lets himself out," "shoots off his mouth" and his pistol at the same time, in handsome style.

But golden seconds have been lost. Alf gains the horse, tears the rein from the post, terrifies the animal by a yell that would do credit to a whole band of Comanches, runs a little way at the side of the flying steed, then vaults upon its back like a circus rider, and, digging his heels into its flanks, lashing it with rein and hand, and yelling until the frightened beast must think that it has been mounted by a legion of demons, courses madly away, unscathed by the hail of bullets and iron-clad profanity hurled after him.—and it seemed as if his heart would leap from his throat in the glad cry:

"Free! Free! Free!"

Well! that Alf Cheswick left a "mad" crowd behind him, you had better believe!

"Gentlemen!" said Sheriff Bob Bolton, with an icy calm and deliberateness that made the "boys" feel that he was a dangerous man when he got "woke up," "gentlemen, he floored me! he shook me! he made me *chaw dirt*! I reckon thar ain't many men in these hyar parts that can tell Bob Bolton to put that in his pipe and smoke it! If ary gentleman present knows of such a one, now's the best time he'll ever have in his life to inform the company."

He paused and looked about on the crowd, as if for reply.

"It seems thar's no takers," he said, presently. Then going back to the original theme:

"Wal, he's a good man, I allow; and I don't bear him no malice. But, gentlemen, thar's one little job that I propose to work up before I pass in my checks. That is, to fitch the murderer of Stephen Rensalier to chalk. It may take ten days—it may take ten years! If you'll excuse me I'll go and git ready for the hunt."

With that same deliberateness he passed into the hotel.

"Gents," said one of the crowd, breaking the dead silence with which all had listened to the sheriff and witnessed his withdrawal, "he's a tough leetle cuss! I'll bet ary man ten to one fer all I'm worth that he fetches his mutton."

And there were no takers!

But in the sanctity of his room, in his own hotel, the sheriff was saying:

"To save an innocent life Bob Bolton let a boy floor him, and shake him, and make him *chaw dirt*! To save his own credit, Bob Bolton must prove to every man, woman and child that saw it, that he done it on purpose. But to do that Bob Bolton must produce the real murderer, so's to give the reason why he let the thing be done."

And from his pocket he drew a bowie-knife, which he had that morning found just off the edge of the veranda of Stephen Rensalier's house, lying close beside a track which the boot of the murderer had left in the soft garden loam. It was the knife Patent-leather Joe had drawn in his victim's bed-chamber, when fearing the intrusion of his valet, and then thrust insecurely into his belt. In the haft were cut two initials:

"P. J."

Meanwhile, Alf Cheswick, flying for his life, had come upon a scene that affected him profoundly. Through the open window of a log-cabin which served as school-house and church, he saw a wedding party.

He stopped, fixed a staring gaze at the bride, then, with a sort of suppressed howl of concentrated fury, leaped from his horse and rushed into the house!

The next instant the room rung again with pistol-shots, and cries of rage and fear!

CHAPTER IX.

MARRIED AT THE MOUTH OF THE REVOLVER!

CLAIRE RENSALIER was a fair-haired, blue-eyed, rosy-lipped little school-girl, and already the sorrows of a grown woman had come to her.

Believing that her lover had proved false, angered at the weakness of her father who had fallen so easy a prey to the adventurers, and furious at the thought of having to recognize as a step-mother the woman who had robbed her of all that she loved, it was not strange that she should lend a ready ear to the dashing Percy Montcalm, who had saved her life and then made love to her in so romantic a fashion.

But alone in that secluded little country church, being married to a man who was in reality a perfect stranger to her, with that purblind old minister indistinctly mumbling over the service, his face buried in his book, and with his deaf old wife and the sexton as bent and infirm as either of the others acting as

witnesses, a chill sense of misgiving swept over her heart, it was all so weird and strange!

She thought of flight. But would not they pursue her like a lot of ghouls? Then, when she was ready to swoon with fear, her heart went out to Alf Cheswick with a great throb of longing. If he would but come, she would be safe!

At that moment—she had not heard the clatter of hoofs, nor the sound of intruding footsteps—she was startled by a voice crying:

"Oh, Claire! In God's name! what are you about to do?"

The droning minister started into full wakefulness, and let his jaw drop.

The sexton wheeled round and stared through his spectacles at the intruder.

The old woman threw up her hands and exclaimed:

"Law me!"

The bridegroom turned, a glare of defiance in his eyes and his hand on the butt of a concealed pistol.

Patent-leather Joe and Flash Lightning stood face to face.

Up to this moment the latter had not recognized his old foe. Now he was dumfounded at the sight of him in the act of robbing him of his wife, as he had robbed his father years ago.

While he stood mute, Claire leaped forward with a great cry:

"Oh, Alf!"

A savage oath passed Patent-leather Joe's lips and his weapon leaped from its ambush.

"Great Heaven, sir! Not in the sanctuary!" cried the sexton.

And in holy horror he caught Arizona's arm and saved Alfred Cheswick's life!

Patent-leather Joe tore himself free, and would have fired again; but a return shot anticipated his, and he fell bleeding before the chancel rail.

"Oh, Alf! What have you done? You have killed him!" screamed Claire.

"Murderer!—the curse of Heaven will fall upon you for this sacrilege!" cried the minister.

"And, what doubtless you fear more, the Vigilantes will hang you, ruffian that you are!" subjoined the sexton, while the old lady went into hysterics.

Alfred Cheswick paid no heed to the others, but answered Claire.

"Ask me not what I have done!" he cried. "It was in self-defense. He would have killed me else. Moreover, he earned his doom years ago! But how came *you* here? What excuse is there for what you was about to do, and would have accomplished, but that accident led me by this deserted place on my way to you at the Misses Milmans', as I supposed?"

"Alf, you were false to me!" sobbed Claire. "How *could* you be so cruel?"

"False to you? *Never!*" asseverated the young man. "It is you that had forgotten me for your new lover!"

And he ground his teeth with jealous bitterness.

"Oh, Alf! How can you stand there and accuse me, when you know *that* you yourself are to blame!"

"I to blame? For what—that you have not written to me for over two months? And while I was begging you for only a line, you were planning this elopement!"

"Alf Cheswick, you are stating what is not true! I never thought of eloping until yesterday. I would not have dreamed of it then, but for papa and that—that—*hateful old thing!*"

Alf groaned.

"But these two months of silence? Why have you not replied to my letters?"

"A very good reason!—you never wrote any!"

"I have written to you nearly every day!"

"Well, I never received one line! And if I had, do you suppose I would reply, after you sent back that broken sixpence?"

And Claire sobbed with pain.

"I never sent back the sixpence. I lost it, Claire."

"But you *did* send it to me! I've got your letter to prove it. Oh! it was the most cruel, wicked stab I ever heard of! I know every word by heart! No wonder—it was short enough, mercy knows! 'Thanking you for past favors, I return the inclosed evidence of misplaced confidence!' And I had loved you so true!"

"Claire, I *never* wrote that!—I swear I didn't. And, truly, I lost the sixpence!"

And in distress that could not have been counterfeited, Alf fell upon his knees, and clinging to her hands, gazed up into her face piteously.

A sudden light broke over Claire's countenance.

"Alf," she said, "I see it all! It's a plot to wreck our happiness by that treacherous old—old—*cat!* She stole the sixpence from you, and sent it to me with that wicked letter. Oh! how I hate her! I know she did it! Nobody else could! I don't know what I shall do to her when I get home! I believe I'll keep still about it, until the minister says that, if any one has any objections to the marriage, let them speak now, or forever hold their peace. Then I'll get up—right in church!—and say:

"*I object!*"

"Won't everybody stare! and won't that sly old cat turn green and yellow and all the colors of the rainbow! You must stand by me and keep her from scratching my eyes out! And when the minister asks me what my objections are, I'll tell them all about her treachery."

"And you think she did this?" asked Alf, who had been in pained thought while Claire ran on with her scheme for revenge. "Then that is not the worst she has done! Oh, Claire!"

"What is it? What else has that wicked creature done?"

"Claire, do you love me?" cried her lover, ignoring her question.

"You know I do, Alf."

"Then you must marry me—at once!"

"Now?"

"Immediately!"

"Oh, Alf!"

"You were ready enough to marry *him!*" cried the lover, with a jealous frown. "You must marry now or never! To-morrow night I shall be a hundred miles from here, if possible;

and before I stop, I shall be a thousand miles away, at least."

"What do you mean? What are you going to do?"

"I am going to leave this accursed country forever!"

"Oh, Alf!"

"Will you marry me?"

"In this clandestine way? Alf, there is no need. Let us wait and be married as other people are. Papa will not object."

"No, he will not object now," said Alf, with a significance which poor Claire, in her ignorance of her father's death, did not divine. "But it is too late to think of these things. Give me my answer—yes, or no? If you do not, I will shoot myself here before your very eyes!"

He looked reckless enough to carry out his threat, as he held the pistol to his head.

"Yes—yes! I will marry you at once!" cried poor Claire; "only take that dreadful weapon away!"

"God bless you, darling! If my undying love can repay you for all you must sacrifice, you shall never regret this step!"

Without more ado, he turned to the gaping minister.

"Come down here, away from that carcass, and proceed with the ceremony you were about to perform. The change of bridegrooms need not disturb you."

"What! marry a murderer? Never, sir!—never!"

"I am in no mood for trifling; whatever your scruples are, you must put them in your pocket. Can you see down that pistol bore? Now, drive ahead!"

The minister saw the logic of Alf Cheswick's argument, and reluctantly yielded to the force of circumstances.

The ceremony over, Alf hurried his almost fainting bride from the church, lifted her into the carriage in which Patent-leather Joe had brought her, and dashed away at lightning speed!

CHAPTER X.

A PRISONER WITHOUT FEAR.

AN amphitheater of mountain peaks domed by the star-gemmed sky!

In the valley, tents and camp-fires, and standing round in their lurid light perhaps a score of as desperate-looking bandits as ever infested the mountain fastnesses of any country!

Here among the crags was their stronghold—the eyrie from which they swooped down upon honest men and robbed them of their hard-earned gold.

In the center of the group were two men, facing each other, both well built fellows, and formidable-looking by reason of a certain reckless insolence of expression, and a bold, defiant flash of the eye.

One, without weapons, stood with folded arms and a sneering smile on his face; the other, armed to the teeth, leaned negligently against a rock, examining the former critically, plainly with some admiration.

"Well, my bold captain," said he who was weaponless, "now that you have me, what are you going to do with me?"

"I was just thinking," replied the other, "whether it wouldn't be to our mutual advantage to make you one of my band."

"Are you in need of a leader?"

"Am I in need of a leader?"

"Certainly—you and your band."

"Well! that's a pretty cool question, isn't it?"

"I haven't the slightest idea of its temperature, sir, I assure you."

"It strikes me that it is some degrees below the freezing point. Indeed, under the circumstances, I think it would knock the bottom out of any ordinary thermometer."

"Possibly. What of it?"

"Do you know who and what I am?"

"Do you want an honest expression of opinion?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I take you for a cut-throat and a thief. You are evidently the leader of this band of ruffians; and I have heard one of them speak of you as Captain Bland. I understand that every mining camp in Wyoming Territory is saving up a choice piece of hemp, to be presented as a testimonial to a certain Captain Bland, whenever his modesty can be so far overcome as to induce him to accept it. He is a very retiring man—this Bland—and denies himself to all save a few select friends."

At the beginning of this bold speech Captain Bland had flushed scarlet, and his hand had moved toward the butt of a revolver; but as his prisoner proceeded, his angry frown relaxed into a smile, half of pleased vanity, half of amusement.

"You have a somewhat abrupt way of stating things, stranger," he said; "but I think I can afford not to get angry with you—"

"As you like about that," was the cool interruption. "But we are wandering from the point. You haven't answered my question. Do you want a leader?"

"Hardly!"

"Then I must decline your generous offer. I never play second fiddle to any man."

"H'm! Cool again! You would not accept a lieutenantcy, for instance?"

"No, sir!"

"Have you considered the probable consequences of your refusal?"

"Such a question calls for no deliberation."

"It may be a matter of life or death to you."

"And would you sell your manhood to save your life?"

"Would it then be forfeiting your manhood to serve under me?"

"Well, I think so! I think that I am a better man than you."

Again Captain Bland flushed scarlet; then became ghastly pale with rage, while his eyes took on a murderous glitter.

He was not used to being thus boldly bearded in his very stronghold—in the presence of men whom he held as the slaves of his will.

"Curse you!" he roared, "do you know that I have but to raise my hand to have you riddled with bullets?"

"No doubt!"

"Then that knowledge should teach you the expediency of bridling that insolent tongue of yours!"

"Not at all; for of course you would not give such an order. But then, come to think, you might—that's a fact."

"Why are you undecided as to my probable course?" asked the bandit chief.

"Well," was the cool reply, "it struck me as being so cowardly, you know, to order twenty men to shoot one unarmed one."

"And, on second thought, you concluded that I *might* do it, notwithstanding its cowardice!" thundered the outwitted bandit.

"There's no betting on what a man *might* do, where he has such unlimited power," was the undisturbed rejoinder.

"Well, sir, before you get through with it you will see that there is no need for me to call upon my men in *this* case."

"Perhaps you might meet me man to man?" suggested the prisoner, as if this thought had just occurred to him.

"Excuse me," said the captain, "I never play a game when it is already in my own hands. I would have nothing to gain, and you nothing to lose."

"My life! That's something to me."

"It is already at my disposal."

"And then you might gain—"

"What?"

"Honor. But perhaps you don't consider that as of any value. Some men don't."

Ignoring the cool insolence of this imputation, Capt. Bland replied:—

"All the honor I would reap from a meeting with you I can afford to dispense with. The question simmers down to this:—Will you leave this place a member of my band, or never leave it alive?"

"I hardly think that a fair statement of the case."

"You will find to your cost that it is the only alternative I will ever present to you."

"I think not. I hope to make better terms with you."

"You may as well stow that hope."

"Look here, pardner," said the prisoner, abruptly, "I'll toss up with you whether I go free or take a high lot up here. Serving under you is out of the question. It is heads or tails for life or death."

"Not much!"

"I'll fight you, then, or any of your band, if you've got a better man."

This cool dare-devil never lost an opportunity to barb his smoothly-flowing words with insult.

"I've refused that already," replied Captain Bland, keeping his temper, while he reflected on what torture he could invent to break the spirit of this man who seemed absolutely without fear—for whom mere death had no terrors.

"Are you afraid of me?" was the next insolent demand.

"Neither of you nor of any living man!"

"Talk is cheap, but it takes money to buy whisky!" was the significant retort.

"As far as you are concerned, you will have to take my courage for granted, since I don't intend to prove it," replied the captain, quietly.

"Ah! I'll make you!"

And with a lightning bound, like the spring of a panther, the cool prisoner leaped sideways and snatched a revolver from the belt of one of the band, who had momentarily turned his head to make some remark to a comrade.

The next instant the frowning muzzle was trained on the heart of the astonished Captain Bland.

CHAPTER XI.

POKER POCKET.

POCKER POCKET, Wyoming Territory, was, according to Judge Sam Stubbs, "the garden spot of this hyar won-derful country!"

The most popular institution in Poker Pocket was the Lone Hand Saloon, presided over by one Short-an'-dirty, a damsel of no ordinary character, to whom we will introduce you presently.

The Lone Hand Saloon was a slab shanty, divided into two compartments, the smaller one in the rear being reserved by the proprietress for domestic purposes, while the larger one in front was the "stamping-ground" of the "boys," dedicated to the sale of "licker 'n ter-backer 'n red herrin's 'n sich!"

In this hall of conviviality Judge Stubbs occupied his own particular seat in the corner, into which no one else ever presumed to intrude.

On a similar pine bench, on the opposite side of the table, one end of which was nailed against the wall, sat Colonel Despard Dangerfield.

Between them, at the inner end of the table, a candle-box stood on end supported the corporal part of Patsy Croghan, a sort of political retainer of Judge Stubbs's, whose principal business seemed to be to admire his Honor in all things, to "back any and every statement that proceeded from the judicial lips, and to back that ornament of the bench to bed, whenever he became top-heavy from having an unusually large "brick in his hat." It is but fair to say that this last office was but seldom required, as under ordinary circumstances the judge could "carry all he could hold."

As usual, his Honor was descanting on the peculiar attractions of Poker Pocket, while he sipped his "p'izen" and smoked his "weed."

"Why, sir," he cried, in conclusion, after such a "puff" as only a true Westerner can give to the place where he has invested his "pile," what d'ye suppose this hyar magic city sports?"

"I am at a loss to imagine," replied Colonel Dangerfield.

"In the first year of her existence, mind ye!" supplemented the judge.

"I'm sure I don't know what wonder to expect."

"Waal, sir! we hold and enjoy, and are ready to maintain against the world, the exclusive right and title to two *ladies*! *Ladies*, you understand! None of your brazen huzzies, but a genuine white article of the female persuasion, which is a *leetle* harder to find between hyar and the Pacific slope!"

"*Ladies*?" repeated Colonel Dangerfield, perhaps a little incredulously.

"Ladies, sir!—*ladies!*" reaffirmed Judge Stubbs, stoutly.

"The swatest craythers in the wide worruld!" put in Patsy, almost plaintively. "Faith, they carry me hairt back to Balleynamagh!"

"One," pursued the judge, dramatically, "whose youth and beauty ravishes the beholder with delight; and one, the lineaments of whose hidden visage no human eye in Poker Pocket hath yet scanned!"

"What is that?" asked the colonel.

"A mystery!" replied the judge, solemnly.

"A mystery?"

"Is it that she hides the grief of her widowhood behind an impenetrable veil; or what shall we say? But, sir, she is a remarkable woman in another respect. She has at least one of the qualifications of a model wife. She never talks back!"

"What in the world are you getting at, judge?" cried Colonel Dangerfield, with awakening curiosity. "That last drink must have gone to your head; and yet I can hardly believe it."

"No, sir! You may rest assured that that isn't my vulnerable point! But, sir, in vulgar Saxon, the mother of our charmer is dumb, though not deaf, and goes constantly veiled."

"H'm! That's strange. I wonder who?"

"I'll never tell you. But in this country a woman—in fact, anything that wears a petticoat—does pretty much as she dog-gone pleases; and the man who has the temerity to question her right will find—

"Eh? What the deuce have we hyar?" he exclaimed, abruptly, as the door of the saloon swung open.

CHAPTER XII.

'APPY 'ARRY.

JUDGE SAM STUBBS greeted the newly-arrived with a smile of expectant interest. One glance of his discerning eye, and he said:

"If I can read human nature, the ball opens with this fellow. Colonel, attend!"

"He's from over the says!" muttered Patsy, angrily. "Faith! he's wan o' thim divils that stairves the poo-ur on the grane sod—the thafe o' the worruld! Divil swape the loikes av him! Phat will he be doin' in this counthry, I dunno! Hasn't he enough an' to spa-ar an English ground, that he will be afther comin' till Ameriky, an' throyin' to b'ate us out av our dues he-ur as well as tha-ur? Bad scan to 'um! mesilf's the b'y that 'ud loik to whelt the face off 'um!"

Unconscious of the diverse emotions to which his advent gave rise, the subject of the foregoing animadversions waited for no formal introduction, but presented himself to the assembled company in his own peculiar way.

"To the gentlemen of Poker Pocket and vicinity—greeting! Ah! I beg your pardon! I see a lady present. Hall honor to the fairer sex! Madam, your 'umble servant! Allow me, with my best bow—'Appy 'Arry, the Henglish Habsentee and Great North American Non-est-inventus! a hindividual 'oo is halways wanted, but never hon 'and!"

"Gentlemen, to our better acquaintance, let us tip the flowing bowl! Honor me, gentlemen! hall 'ands round!"

"Hour beauteous 'ostess, treat the boys 'and-some, with the best you've got!"

To so gracious an invitation all responded with smiling alacrity.

"Eh, my dear colonel?—*life!*" murmured the judge, as he got his feet under his center of gravity, and ambled up to the bar.

"Faith! he's a swate cr'athur", wid a stomach on 'um that tells 'um the nades av his fella min!" was Patsy's tribute to the stranger's generosity, his hostility yielding to the seduction of "potheen."

"A sharper with an ax to grind," muttered Colonel Dangerfield; but nevertheless he added another to the score or so ranged along the bar.

When the glasses were filled, Judge Stubbs coughed behind his hand.

The denizens of Poker Pocket took the hint, and knocking their glasses on the bar, shouted:

"Stubbs! Stubbs! Speech! speech!"

The judge bowed with the modesty of an old stager in politics.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I am sensible of the honor done me by this unexpected popular call."

"Sir," to 'Appy 'Arry, "in behalf of my fellow-citizens, and as the representative of the judicial interests of Poker Pocket, I welcome you to our beautiful city, and, in fact, to all this hyar won-derful country. You have come to us, a stranger; and be assured, sir, we will take you in— Hum! Ah! Baugh!"

The judge's figure had run him into an expression whose double meaning did not escape the bluff miners, and they went off in a roar of laughter at his expense, striking the bar with their glasses and pounding the floor with their heavy boots.

Preserving his dignity with the cast-iron assurance of his profession, the politician bowed, as if in acknowledgment of applause, and pursued:

"But, sir, as brevity is the soul of wit, I content myself with extending the hand of good-fellowship, and saying once more—welcome to Poker Pocket and its hospitalities!"

When the rounds of boisterous applause which greeted his speech had subsided, 'Appy 'Arry responded with becoming modesty:

"Madam, and gentlemen, I'd fail in the heffort to rival the heloquence of your renowned hexponent; but you'll find *my* sentiments in the bottoms of your glasses."

After a ringing cheer, Poker Pocket instituted a simultaneous search. It is fair to assume that the sentiments were found and appropriated; for when the glasses were set down there was nothing left in them.

"And now, gentlemen," cried 'Appy 'Arry, cheerily, producing from his pocket a ball and thimbles, and proceeding to manipulate them with lightning dexterity on one of the tables, "ere we hare again—the original and honly 'Appy 'Arry, the Henglish Habsentee and Great North American Non-est-inventus—just arrived from the hold country, where kings, princes and nobles, queens, princesses and their ladies in waiting, hattended 'is levees, and gazed with wonder, hadmiration and delight upon 'is world."

renowned performances! 'Ere we hare, gentlemen! The heye-opener we 'ave just 'ad should sharpen your hoptics, and enable you to follow the little joker in 'is feats of ground and lofty tumbling. Ah! there 'e goes! Do you see 'im? 'Oo can tell me w'ere 'e is now? Eh? By Jove! you 'ave 'im, kneow. 'E must be spryer next time. 'E 'as heyes the sharpest haffer 'im. Ah! there 'e goes! 'Oo's the next lucky man?"

In a twinkling 'Appy 'Arry was surrounded by a circle of miners, three or four deep, so eager that some stood on benches and tables to look over the heads of those who had been lucky enough to gain the inner circle; and forthwith money and gold-dust began to change hands with a rapidity only equaled by 'Appy 'Arry's lightning manipulation of the instruments of his vocation.

While he is thus reaping a golden harvest from the seed so judiciously sown on entering the room, we have an opportunity to see that he is not the typical John Bull, whose aldermanic proportions and florid complexion are so suggestive of mighty conquests in beef-eating and the draining of countless tankards of "bitter hale" and "'alf-an'-'alf." On the contrary, he is a wiry little fellow, of not more than five feet two or three, with a shrewd mouth and keen, restless eyes; light, Saxon hair and mutton-chop whiskers.

A Derby hat, a black silk neckerchief, a waistcoat of worsted stuff, a sack coat of brown plush with side pockets, corduroy trowsers, and heavy-soled shoes make up his decidedly English dress.

But in the midst of the clicking of his nimble thimbles and the clink of money changing hands—the ejaculations of satisfaction and oaths of chagrin, bantering jeers and congratulations, suggestions and warnings, with which the excited miners made a Babel of profanity and jargon—the smooth current of 'Appy 'Arry's words, which fell from his lips in an incessant stream like grain from a hopper, was abruptly cut short by a pounding that arrested the attention of every one.

The patrons of the Lone Hand Saloon turned, one and all, to see its proprietress, the redoubtable Short-an'-dirty, standing behind her deserted bar in her "war-paint."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TABLES TURNED.

TAKEN completely unawares by the unexpected move of the prisoner whom he had supposed helplessly in his power, Captain Bland could only stare breathlessly.

His band stood round in open-mouthed dismay.

The icy voice of the prisoner cut the stillness.

"My dear captain," he said, with a tantalizing smile and honeyed accents, "you see that I have the drop on you. Don't precipitate your own death, which the slightest sign of hostile intent on your part, will render inevitable."

Then, with equal smoothness, he addressed the men, before they had time to recover from their bewilderment.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is a large day for surprises. Don't all shoot at once; for the

first man who is so rash as to move a muscle seals the death-warrant of his captain.

"You see," he pursued, again addressing the captain, "I am forced, though much against my better feeling, to hang your life on a slender chance. If you have a jealous or ambitious follower, he might now sate his malice, or secure your removal from his path, without hazard to himself, by what would look like an injudicious display of zeal in your defense."

"Curse you! it was to gain time for this chance that you have been chaffing me!" growled the discomfited robber chief.

"My dear captain!" was the smiling reply, "it was with a view to just this turn in the wheel of fortune that I condescended to waste my time on you."

"But that we may the more at our ease discuss the outcome of this, to you, unexpected change of front, oblige me by requesting your men to throw up their hands."

Captain Bland hesitated; and his eyes flashed round the circle of his followers with a burning glance.

"I would give all I am worth," he reflected, "if one of those dogs would shoot him now."

"Don't take any risks, my dear captain," said the prisoner with his icy smile. "Although some of your men are behind me, and I cannot see them, I have unusually sharp ears—indeed, you would be surprised to learn how slight a sound I can detect—and none of your gallant followers can take a step toward me, throw a missile at me, or raise the hammer of his revolver, without my receiving warning of the treacherous intent; and, my dear captain, the slightest suspicious sound seals your doom!"

"Indeed, you are more interested in putting your men out of temptation than I am. Think, sir!—while you hesitate, one of them may remember some old grudge."

"Throw up your hands!" commanded the robber chief.

The men obeyed.

"Now, my dear captain—since you are captain, and in authority, you know, request them one at a time, to march to your rear. I want to see their interesting faces."

Captain Bland, scowling murderously, gave the requisite command.

One by one, the men, with their hands held above their heads, marched into place behind their captain.

"And now, my dear captain," continued this strange prisoner, who had captured his captors, "oblige me by throwing up your own hands, and marching forward."

"Curse you! I'll die first!" howled the irate chief.

"Very well," was the cool retort. "It is for you to elect. But I think that on reflection you will pocket your dignity and comply with my wishes. I will give you a chance to reconsider your rash determination while I count three. One!—"

"Hold on!—there's two sides to this question," suggested the captain. "You can't shoot me without losing your own life the next instant. Eh, my men?"

"Ay!" went up a fierce rumble of assent from the men, who didn't much relish, you may

he assured, this having their whole number "surrounded" by one.

"You hear?" cried Captain Bland, exultantly. "The thing is about as broad as it is long, I fancy!"

"Not at all. As you just now suggested, my life being already forfeit, I have nothing at stake. And then I calculate on another thing."

"On what?"

"Your cowardice. *Two!*"

A furious oath burst from the lips of the captain.

"I'll show you whether I'm a coward or not!" he yelled.

And rage blinding him to fear, and the knowledge of his real helplessness, he seized the butt of one of his revolvers.

"Don't draw it!" said the prisoner, in tones that cut the air like a whistling bullet. "You know that I can send you down below before its muzzle got free from the holster. But I see that you're a mule for stubbornness and a fool for hardihood. Nothing will do you but to douse your glim; so here goes for the last count. *Th—*"

But the count was not completed.

Captain Bland's hands went up like a flash, while his face became livid with fear, and his involuntary gasp was plainly audible to all of his men.

"Forward march!" commanded the prisoner, now dropping his tone of banter, and speaking in the short, sharp, crisp, ringing tones of a man who had resolved to permit no further paltering.

Captain Bland, accepting the situation at last, advanced promptly.

"Halt!"

The captain stopped with soldier-like precision.

"About face!"

The robber wheeled as on a pivot.

Deftly the prisoner disarmed his late captor.

"Now, sir, retire yonder."

And so, taking them one by one, he disarmed the whole band.

"And now," said the prisoner, "we can negotiate at our ease. I am going to allow you what you would have denied me."

"What is that?"

"A chance for your life!"

"Look here, stranger," said the bandit chief, "who are you, anyway?"

"You may know me as *Arizona!*"

So Alf Cheswick's bullet didn't "finish" the Iron Heart, after all!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TEST OF BATTLE!

"You may know me as *Arizona*," said the bold prisoner.

The announcement was received with a murmur of astonishment by the mountain bandits.

"Fur rocks, boys, the Cap dropped on a scorcher when he waked him up," whispered one of the men.

"I've heard of him before," said another. "He's the boss sharp that straddled Camp Verde, and clapped it into his breeches pocket for a hull day—single-handed, yo onderstand!"

Every one looked upon their late prisoner with a new respect.

As for Captain Bland, his jaw had dropped.

"I'm elected!" he thought, within his quailing heart. "This is my last round. That fellow will never let up on me until he cooks my goose!"

"Let us see just how we stand," said Arizona, in a business-like way. "I was out prospecting a little on my own hook, and accidentally stumbled upon this little hornets' nest. If you had lain low, I might have gone on, and been none the wiser. But your men thought it a fine joke to bag me and put me through."

"Well, they dropped upon me unawares. I pre-empted high lots for three of their crowd, and then the cattle run me under foot with numbers, and waltzed me into camp."

"I gave you another chance, by offering to call all bets off, and clear out. That wouldn't do you. No man should go away with the secret of your rendezvous. 'Put up, or shut up!' said you, as sassy as you please."

"Well, things have changed since then. Now I shall pitch the trump."

"What do you propose?" asked Captain Bland uneasily.

"I have concluded not to leave this pocket except as a member of this band."

"But I offered to make you my lieutenant."

"And I said, that I never played second fiddle."

Captain Bland's face dropped.

"Do you expect me to serve under you?" he demanded, with a frown.

"You might do worse than that, my man!"

"Better or worse, that I'll never do!"

"Don't trouble yourself. You'll never have the chance."

"What do you mean?"

"That there ain't room for both you and me!"

"And one of us—"

"Has got to go up the flume!"

"At the mouth of the pistol?"

"You've hit it!"

"But, suppose you get the better of me, that don't put you in my place, by any means."

"We'll see about that!—Men! How many of you want a leader who is afraid of neither man nor the devil?—a leader who cheerfully offers his life to the first man who has got the sand to take it?"

Not a man spoke.

"Come! Out with it!" said Arizona. "Yes or no?"

"I reckon, boss," said one, finally—"without sayin' nothin' ag'in' you, d've onderstand—that the boys is purty well satisfied with what they've got. Eh, boys?"

There was a general murmur of assent.

"That's right!" declared Arizona, as if well pleased. "I'm glad there are no sneaks among you. The man who would go back on his captain just because he was in a hobble wouldn't do to serve under me!"

"Captain Bland, you've got just the band of brave fellows that I want. As long as you're alive they'll stand by you, and I'll have no show. What follows? I must fight you for them!"

"But, as I said before, killing me won't secure my men."

"I flatter myself that I can negotiate with them when you are out of the way. But whether I can or can't is an after consideration, which can make no difference with one thing, at least. I'm bound to fight *you*! So which shall it be?—pistols or knives?—or would you, like the Irishman, prefer that we sit down here and see which dies first in the ordinary course of nature?"

"Well, sir," cried Captain Bland, who was far from being a coward. "I will show you that I can be a man as well as you."

"My gallant band, I want first to thank you for your loyalty to me. I have always tried to do the square thing by you—"

"That you have, captain! Raise her, boys!—raise her!"

"Ay! Ay!"

And you have stood handsomely by me. Now I propose to meet Arizona, hyar. If I'm rubbed out, give me a white burial!"

"That we will, captain!"

"Afterward, you can do as you please about making terms with my conqueror. But, if you don't want to serve him, I want it to be an understood thing that he goes free. I know he'll not give you away, boys, if you prefer to fight under one of your old number."

"I agree to that," said Arizona.

"You pledge your words, then, men?" asked Captain Bland.

"Ay, captain. There'll be nothing but fair play in this camp."

"Then, sir," to Arizona, "I'm ready. I choose pistols, at twelve paces!"

The preliminaries were soon over.

Then in that mountain pocket, far up among the clouds, with the scene lighted by the lurid flames of the camp-fires, and those bearded outlaws ranged at either side, these men faced each other, their revolvers hanging at their sides.

"Gentlemen, are you ready?"

A dead silence!

"One!—two!—THREE!"

A double flash!—a blended report!

Captain Bland fell upon his face, without a groan!

Arizona stood like a rock!

CHAPTER XV.

SHORT-AN'-DIRTY.

STANDING behind her deserted bar, and pounding it vigorously with a "billy"—a short club of seasoned hickory, as hard and almost as heavy as iron, with which she was wont to "cool off" such patrons of the Lone Hand as become too "obstropicalous"—Short-an'-dirty would have but ill served as a painter's model—that is to say, *in point of beauty*!

Her frowsy head was a "mop" of yellow hair, twisted into a tumble-down, scraggy knot. Such portions of her face as had come in contact with water were plainly distinguishable from other parts where this accident had not befallen. Her dress was of the simplest and most primitive kind allowed by law, consisting of a gray woolen skirt girding in an upper garment of muslin, of which suffice it to say that the sleeves were rolled up above the elbows, disclosing red, mus-

cular arms, which never failed to command respect when set akimbo, with hands on hips. Shoes and stockings Short-an'-dirty despised, save when the rigors of winter necessitated the donning of boots; then she incased her delicate feet in men's sizes!

Perhaps some of this personal neglect was due to the fact that Short-an'-dirty had but one eye; and then, as the "boys" all agreed, she was "noways proud."

Now her face was fairly purple with portentous fury; her lips were livid; her one eye gleamed ominous lightnings!

When she had thus "called the meeting to order," one of the miners anticipated her in a way that showed that this sort of summons was not unfamiliar, and also "gave away" its usual significance:—

"It's all right, Short-an'-dirty. This hyar's all peaceable, an'—"

"Dry up yer yawp, Billy Blowhard!" thundered the Amazon, from a pair of lungs which certainly betrayed no consumptive tendency, "ur, the fu'st thing *you* know, you'll wake up an' find yerself a-sailin' out o' hyar like a ring-tailed snorter, with a swelled head!"

Abashed by this sounding threat, Billy Blowhard, who owed his nickname to a certain weakness for braggadocio, "wilted"; and "all hands" waited for Short-an'-dirty to announce her sovereign pleasure.

"Hark! my dear colonel," whispered the judge, radiant with smiling anticipation. "She's a character! Here's more *life*!"

"Phat a melojus voice she has!" muttered Patsy.

"Luck at the forrum o' the swate crayther! An' d'ye moind the dilicate airrums of her; an' the two han's that take me hairt inthoیرهly! Troth! it's equally at home she'd be at the wash-tub or spankin' the childher!"

"Look a-hyer, boss!" said Short-an'-dirty, glaring at 'Appy 'Arry with her one eye in a way that showed that she was on a "business trip" this time, if never before, "did I understand you to order the drinks fer the crowd?"

Now 'Appy 'Arry had traveled, and knew a thing or two; so he "dropped" with a smile that would have sweetened sour cream.

"Certainly, my dear madam!—most assuredly!" he answered, with effusion. "I thought that was hunderstood. Heverybody calls for w'at 'e wants, and for as much of it as 'e wants; and I stand the footing. Step hup, gentlemen—don't be barshful! But, stay! hour fair 'ostess 'ad better 'and the liquor round, per'aps. There may be thirsty gents 'oo would rather not lose their places 'ere by stepping hup to the bar. Hanything at all, ma'am, to make it livelier for you. I halways like to encourage 'ome trade, and above all to favor the ladies!"

If Short-an'-dirty was mollified, she did not show it by any pleasanter expression of face.

Grimly she set to work to fill the certainly handsome order of her patron, muttering to herself:

"It's all right, my covey, as long as you keep up the racket at *this* end o' the shop; but when you fergit *that* ceremony, you're electe*d*—the imperial h'ist through that thar door—*de* yer bottom dollar on that, sonny! Ef you inter-

duce side games in *this* ranch, you've got to pay as ye go—licker up, an' money down!"

"Ah! my dear colonel, what do you think of that?" chuckled Judge Stubbs, rubbing his hands gleefully.

"I think that that unwashed fiend has her one eye directed exclusively to business!" said the colonel, with a frown of dislike.

"An', faith! the Englishman too!" added Patsy. "For ivery drink that comes out av his pocket he'll put the price o' tin in!"

"That's life!" commented the judge, complacently.

Meanwhile, Short-an'-dirty was availing herself of her opportunities.

Without waiting for orders, she set liquor before every one in the room, with an expedition which showed that she knew how to "rush" business.

Perhaps there was a tinge of sarcasm in 'Appy 'Arry's voice as he suggested, blandly:

"If you honly 'ad an assistant, my dear madam."

Short-an'-dirty bristled at once.

Stopping short in her active "whisky-slinging," she stood in the middle of the floor with arms akimbo and hands on hips.

"Look a-hyar, young feller," she cried, "you're green in these hyar parts; but ef you're goin' to make this hyar shebang yer stampin'-ground, ye might as well l'arn the ropes fu'st as last.

"The fu'st law an' gospel o' this hyar place is that Short-an'-dirty runs the hull machine! No back talk! I don't like chin-music fer nothin'! I'm chief hyar, an' run the thing to suit myself. So shut up yer dog-gone meat-trap an' mind yer own business, ur through that door you sail on the Rocky Mountain Lightnin' Express! Don't take my say-so, pilgrim. Ax any o' the boys. They've heared this racket before, an' know it's A No. 1, copper-bottomed, an' riveted on the inside! You hear *me*? It's Short-an'-dirty that's talkin'! I plays a lone hand in this hyar barrack, you bet!"

And, having blown off all her steam, Short-an'-dirty resumed her work as if no interruption had taken place.

"Peppery!" commented Judge Sam Stubbs, nudging Colonel Dangerfield delightedly.

"Be me sowl, she'd make the quane o' mother-in-laws!" suggested Patsy.

Colonel Dangerfield had nothing to say. Evidently Short-an'-dirty "held over" him.

'Appy 'Arry was too wise to bandy words with the virago. He was "coining" money. That sufficed for him.

At this moment the door swung wide, to give admittance to a man who evidently expected, and was bound to have "elbow-room."

"Ah! my dear colonel, here is the king-pin of this cut-throat community! I expect to have to hang him before long!" murmured the judge, with great complacency, considering the sanguinary character of his expectations.

formed the bandit's stronghold, leaving the silence of death behind.

Arizona faced the men whose leader he had just slain.

"Well, gentlemen," he asked, "was that square?"

Not a man spoke.

"No dissenting voice? Then let's to business. You know one of the purposes of my entering into this fight. I want a band of men ready to follow me anywhere I dare to lead them; and rest assured, I dare to lead you anywhere on earth! How many of you will enter my service?"

"Captain Arizona, I'm one!"

A burly, bushy-whiskered fellow stepped forward.

"What is your name?" asked Arizona.

"The boys call me Scowler."

"On account of your *smiling* countenance, eh? Not badly named. What was your position under Captain Bland?"

"I was second in command."

"Lieutenant Scowler, I'm glad to accept your services," said Arizona, with a peculiarly significant emphasis on the title, as he extended his hand. "I think we shall get along famously."

"Thankee, sir; I'll do my best."

"Captain Arizona, I shall be glad of a place under you."

"And your name?"

"Snaky!"

"Ah! you have a wit among you; and a shrewd fellow, I'll wager! I shall find employment for all your cunning."

So one and all of the band came over to their new captain.

"And now, my men, for the oath of allegiance," cried Arizona.

Standing opposite Scowler, he placed the point of his bowie-knife against his bared breast, just over the heart, and received the point of his lieutenant's weapon in a similar fashion.

In his left hand he held a cocked revolver, which he pointed at Scowler's head.

Following his example, the men ranged themselves in a double line, bared their broad breasts, each placing the keen point of his knife over a comrade's heart, and receiving one in return; and each gazed down the black throat of a revolver. Standing in this weird fashion, the night-shrouded heavens overhead, the mountain peaks ranged round and looking down upon them like grim sentinels, and the lurid firelight cast over all, they repeated after their captain the provisions of the oath.

"We swear to be true and loyal to our captain and to each other!"

"We swear to stand by our captain and each other in distress to the sacrifice of our own lives!"

"We swear to obey, promptly and without question, the commands of our captain and other officers, each according to his rank!"

"We swear to shoot or stab unto death, without fear and without favor, any one who shall betray his captain, or any of his fellows, or any of the secrets of this organization; and to accept the same fate for ourselves, at the hands of our comrades, if we shall in like manner betray the trust reposed severally in us!"

CHAPTER XVI.

BROTHERS OF THE LARAMIE HILLS.

THE echoes of the pistol-shots died away among the crags that shut in the mountain pocket which

"Thus, at the mouth of the revolver and point of the bowie-knife, on our lives, swear we all!

"*So mote it be!*"

The bowie-knife was pressed into the flesh until it brought a drop of red blood!

The revolver was shot into the air over the head at which it had been pointed!

"Hail, my gallant band! Brothers of the Laramie Hills!" shouted Arizona.

"Three cheers for Captain Arizona! Raise her, boys! raise her!" cried Scowler, in response.

And the mountain peaks rung with their lusty cheers.

Captain Bland was buried as he had requested.

And now a word of explanation.

You must know that Arizona accidentally fell in with Captain Bland's band of outlaws, and achieved his victory over their leader, shortly after his abortive attempt to "pocket a cool million" by inveigling his school-girl cousin into a clandestine marriage.

Disappointed in his bold scheme for sudden enrichment, to be followed by a life of seeming respectability, he had returned to his old wild life among the hills.

From the fall of Captain Bland to the evening when we introduce the reader to the Lone Hand Saloon, a year had elapsed, during which Arizona had been captain of a band of outlaws who had become a veritable mountain scourge.

The fact that the band had changed masters was kept secret from the world; and, as Arizona had won distinction in another part of the country, no one now suspected his identity with the bold outlaw whose exploits for the past year had made the name of Captain Bland famous all over the mountains.

But, in his private character, Arizona had made a reputation which justified Judge Stubbs's cool prediction:

"He is the king-pin of this cut-throat community, and I expect to have to hang him before long!"

And which, further, convinced the denizens of Poker Pocket that, as a "boss sharp," he "filled the bill!"

As they were wont to say:

"He is the only man that ever put the Lone Hand Saloon into his breeches-pocket, and drew the fangs of the untterrified Short-an'-dirty."

The legend yet runs in Poker Pocket, how he tamed the tiger-cat; and those who witnessed that strange conquest will tell you that Short-an'-dirty's one eye turned green that day, and green it has remained ever since.

"Ef you don't believe the story, thar's the eye fur you to look at. You can't go back on that eye, stranger! I tell ye, she went fur to mount him one night, like she does the rest of us. He never tetched her—he never laid the weight of a finger on her; but, while she stood with arms akimbo, red-hot an' still a-heatin', he sot them eyes o' his'n on her, in a way that made cold streaks run up an' down her back, I reckon; an' Short-an'-dirty caved! It was the purtiest thing you ever see, by the iumpin' Jingo!"

And now this man entered Short-an'-dirty's castle, swinging open the door with an air which showed that he thought himself "cock o' the walk."

CHAPTER XVII.

ARIZONA'S FALL.

AND you ought to have seen Short-an'-dirty—what shall we call it? *Could* Short-an'-dirty smile?"

At any rate, it was a twist of her face with which she honored nobody except Arizona; and so the "boys" decided that "p'raps it wa'n't her fault ef that was her best hold in the smil-in' line, bein' as how, of course, you couldn't expect her one eye to see how t'other side of her face looked."

But one thing, at least, was of unquestionable significance.

She set down a trayful of liquor with which she was about to serve her other patrons, in order to give Arizona immediate attendance.

"Brandy!" he ordered, gruffly.

With a full bushy beard and the "outfit" generally of a mountain bully he was a very different-looking person, you may be assured, from the dainty gentleman who, as Percy Montcalm, so nearly lured pretty and romantic Claire Rensalier to life-long misery.

When he threw a coin on the bar, in payment for his liquor, Short-an'-dirty said, in a voice altogether different from that in which she addressed others:

"That's all right, Arizona. Happy Harry pays."

"And who the devil is Happy Harry?" demanded the outlaw, aggressively.

"The gent over thar in the corner, with the thimble-rig fixin's. He stands the house to-night."

"Waal, I generally pay my own way. No Happy Harry in mine, if you please!"

"All right, boss. Just as you say," acquiesced Short-an'-dirty, proceeding to make change for her churlish guest. "I hain't no call to back no man's dignity—leastways, ag'in' you, Arizona."

Short-an'-dirty referred to the time-honored custom which makes the refusal to accept the proffered hospitality of a drink an insult, which the would-be entertainer is bound to resent, or "crawfish."

But 'Appy 'Arry needed no champion.

"Eh? Did I 'ear my name called?" he asked, quickly, and immediately put the instruments of his game into his pocket and stepped boldly forward.

The fact was, he had plucked "every man Jack" of the eager crowd that had sought to "buck ag'in' his sleight of hand," and was glad of a diversion which would give him a good excuse for ending the game, and at the same time turn the thoughts of his victims from their losses.

And, oh! but wouldn't the prospect of a fight do this? *Waal*, I reckon!

But with Arizona!—and that little snip of an Englisher!

The men stood aghast.

"You dog-gone fool!—do you know who you're

climbin'?" whispered one, whose intentions were better than the words in which he couched them.

But, not seeming to hear him, 'Appy 'Arry advanced to the bar with easy assurance, and a look of questioning on his face.

Judge Stubbs was delighted.

"Now, for it, my dear colonel!" he whispered tipping his hat further over his eye and rubbing his hands with enthusiastic expectancy.

"*The dirthy little divil!* Sure he'll ate 'um!" was Patsy's comment.

"Well, sir, you're a stranger to me; but so are all the rest of these gentlemen. I 'ave the honor to stand treat this hevening; and if you will join us in a social glass, we'll 'ave another hall-'ands-round. Put up your money, sir. Hev-erything is as free as the hair you breathe!"

In reply to this cordial invitation, Arizona glanced contemptuously at his would-be host, and growled:

"Aw! button up your lip! A mouth as big as yours is apt to get slapped, if you poke it round whar it ain't wanted!"

At this wanton insult 'Appy 'Arry's eyes flashed angrily.

"What, sir!" he cried, "do you not only refuse to drink with me—that's affront enough in this country, I hunderstand—but must you repay my courtesy with hinsolence of speech!"

Deigning no reply, Arizona coolly turned his back on the incensed Englishman, and addressed the proprietress of the saloon, with a touch of impatience in his voice:

"Will you give me my change?"

Thus far Short-an'-dirty had stood with mouth agape, staring at 'Appy 'Arry, thunderstruck at the temerity of this "whiffet" who dared to quarrel with the man whose eye alone had cowed her.

The sound of Arizona's voice so startled her that she dropped the coin into the open till, crying:

"Yes, boss!—yes!"

But 'Appy 'Arry's voice rung clear and high.

"By 'Eavens! you shall drink or fight!"

And, with a bound, he snatched both of Arizona's unguarded revolvers from his belt.

Like lightning Arizona slapped his hand behind him, where no ready pistol-butt now awaited his eager grip, and whirled upon his disposessor.

He looked straight down the bores of his own weapons, held as steady as rocks; then glanced up at a pair of blue eyes that glistened like steel.

Well, you'd better believe there was a startled community in the Lone Hand Saloon, just about that time o' day!

A groan of dismay rose from that score of throats.

After that, perfect silence fell. Everybody was dumb with expectancy. What would Arizona do?

The stranger certainly "had the drop on him." If he chose to keep that advantage, the comb of the cock o' the walk was unmistakably cut—he was powerless!

Little or big, the revolver puts all men on the same plain.

Short-an'-dirty was the first to regain her

tongue; perhaps because she was the only woman in the room:

"You little whelp of a British manikin!" she cried. "Do you dast to come over hyar an' raise a row in my shebang? Consarn yer dirty leetle picter! I'll pitch ye neck an' crop into the street! Blow me ef I don't!"

And snatching up the billet which was her favorite weapon, she rested one hand on her bar and vaulted over it, "just like a real man!"

But, before she could make any demonstration against 'Appy 'Arry, Arizona himself caught her by the arm and whirled her out of the way.

"Do you know whose quarrel you're meddling in?" he demanded, with a frown that subdued the termagant at once.

He was sufficiently humiliated at the advantage the Englishman held over him, in the presence, too, of members of his own band. He did not wish to be made a laughing-stock by having it said that he was helped out of his "hobble" by a woman.

Scowler next interposed, coming to the relief of his chief:

"Hold on thar, stranger! Fair play is fair play the world over. You can't jump on a man that way without callin' of him an' givin' him a show. The biddest bloke in the country might bounce the best of us in that style. We don't look on an' see no murderin' hyar!"

A murmur of assent ran round the room.

But Arizona would not accept even this.

"Waal," he said, "it seems as if I had lots of friends. Much obliged, gentlemen; but I reckon I can fight my own battles."

"No offense, boss," replied Scowler. "I only wanted to see an even thing, man to man."

"As for you, sir," proceeded Arizona, frowning at 'Appy 'Arry, "give me half a show—drop those pistols to your side, and let me draw my bowie, and I'll fight you with that advantage."

"You put a low hestimate on my self-esteem," said 'Appy 'Arry, pleasantly. "I hask no advantage over you, sir. I only want to keep you from chewing me hup, while I make a proposition."

"Well, sir, what proposition?"

"This! The Yankee way of settling little personal differences of this kind is not hexactly the Hinglish way, ye know. You're a bigger man than I am, and just as well put together."

"Now suppose we put aside *hart* and rely wholly on *nature*? What do you say to a bout at fisticuffs, just to amuse the lads, ye know?"

"Any thing that you prefer," said Arizona, carelessly drawing his bowie-knife and laying it on the bar.

"As promptly 'Appy 'Arry handed the pistols back to their owner, with a bow.

Without removing his coat, the Englishman got into position.

Arizona imitated his example.

The spectators were delighted, and instantly fell to betting on the result.

Arizona's reputation made public opinion shy of 'Appy 'Arry, but after the first preliminary passes—feelers, so to speak—the Englishman found backers.

All of a sudden he shot forward a lightning

blow, taking Arizona a stinging clip fairly between the eyes, sending him to grass, and fetching the claret in streams.

For once in his life, at least, the iron-hearted adventurer lost his head.

Furious with humiliation at the shout that went up over his downfall, he got upon his feet and rushed madly at his adversary.

Instead of dodging his assault, 'Appy 'Arry suddenly bent forward and downward, thrust his head between the legs of his foe, and, rising instantly, threw him a complete somerset over his head!

Arizona struck fairly on his back, and lay stunned and motionless.

The battle was over before the spectators realized that it had actually begun.

The dismayed silence was broken by Scowler's voice shouting:

"Foul! Foul!"

And he sprung forward, drawing a revolver with murderous intent!

CHAPTER XVIII.

"WANTED, BUT NOT HON 'AND."

BUT 'Appy 'Arry quickly thrust his hands into the side-pockets of his coat, and almost instantly a pistol exploded, setting his right pocket afire.

The shot was not wasted, for Scowler dropped his weapon, disabled by the passage of a bullet through his forearm.

"It's a poor preceptor that don't practice 'is hown preaching," said 'Appy 'Arry, coolly. "If I 'ad been disposed to show you the same fair play you would 'ave given me just now, I might 'ave 'ad your life as well as not."

"By all the gods of battle, colonel!" cried Judge Stubbs, in ecstasy, "her Majesty's subject fired from his pocket, without aim! He's as ready with the pistol as with his fists. Bless my soul and body! did you ever see anything more neatly done?"

But here Short-an'-dirty's shrill voice rose above the hubbub.

"D'ye think I'm goin' to stand the common ruck an' run fightin' in my ranch? I'll land you both through that door as sure's my name is Short-an'-dirty!"

Whether the virago would have succeeded in making good her words or not, fate here put in a diversion.

A piping, childish voice called shrilly:

"Oh, Short-an'-dirty! Short-an'-dirty! Tige's a-dyin'!—Tige's a-dyin'! See 'im! He's gaspin' fur breath! He's a goner, sure!"

And a little runt of a girl, all rags and dirt and frowsy hair, rushed into the saloon from the inner room, carrying in her arms a mangy bull-pup, the ugliest animal that ever was born!

Short-an'-dirty uttered a howl of dismay and grief, and forgetting the belligerents whom she was on the point of ejecting from her door, snatched the dog from the child with one hand, while with the other she dealt her a cuff on the side of the head, which knocked her over and over on the floor.

"Oh, dear me suz! oh, dear me suz! what *shill* I do?" she howled, rushing about distractedly, with the bull-pup hugged to her bosom, "Thar! thar! Tige, don't ye go an' flummix! Oh, Lord!

he's bu'sted! What *shill* I do? what *shill* I do? Boo!—hoo!—hoo!"

And blubbering with grief she ran off with her strange pet into the inner room, leaving the saloon to take care of itself.

"Howly Mother!" shouted Patsy, "ain't that the b'atin' o' the divil?"

While the rest stood aghast, wrestling with a strange idea. Was it possible that Short-an'-dirty loved anything?

But before the question was solved there came the sound of a measured tramp! tramp! and a gruff voice commanding:

"Steady, men! Heyes right! Carry batons! Blast this bloody country! You never know whether you're hon your 'ead or hon your 'eels, by Joe!"

'Appy 'Arry was seen to start and glance about as if for some avenue of escape, muttering:

"'Eavens and hearth!"

The next instant he bolted into Short-an'-dirty's virgin bower, slamming the door after him.

A yell of rage showed how Short-an'-dirty received this intrusion into her private apartment.

Then there was the sound of a window-sash hastily raised, a scuffling noise, as of some one making a hurried exit, and the window went down with a bang, just as the saloon door swung open to give admittance to three men dressed in the uniform of the London police, with glazed helmet and strap at the chin.

They were evidently a sergeant and two men from the ranks.

The officer was a grizzly old fellow; his subordinates looked like wooden soldiers; and all three were stiff as ramrods.

"Dress hup, there! Heyes right!" he commanded, as they entered the door shoulder to shoulder, keeping step like soldiers on dress parade.

"'Alt!"

They came to a standstill in the middle of the room.

Producing a small scroll of paper, the sergeant cried in a sing-song tone:

"Hin the name of 'Er Graceous Majesty, Queen of Great Britain and Hireland and Hempress of Hindia, I call upon 'Arry 'Ammohd hotherwise known as 'Appy 'Arry, to surrender 'is body to the servants hof 'is righteous sovereign!"

"Eh? What is it?"

"Is it alive?"

"Does it breathe?"

"Pinch it and see if it hollers!"

With facetious suggestions, the miners gathered about the strange new-comers, grinning broadly with amused curiosity.

They plucked the coat of the policeman, who never moved a muscle.

They walked about the sergeant, staring at him as if he were some curious animal on exhibition.

"Who an' what in thunder be you anyway?" demanded one.

"Hi, sir? I am the representative of the magisterial power of the British Hempire, sir!—more especially of the city of London, Hengland! I am in quest of one 'Appy 'Arry, and

'ave traced 'im to this 'ouse! 'Ave you secreted 'im hanywhere?"

"Eh, gents?" laughed the miner, "he's after the illustrious English Absentee and Great North American Non-est inventus, fur a sure-enough fact! As the leetle cuss said, when wanted, he ain't on hand! Ha! ha! ha!"

"See hyar, stranger, the gent you're after has piked out."

"As *what*, sir? Do you suppose I hunderstand the bloody hidiums of this blarsted country? We talk Hinglish over in Hingland, ye know!"

"Oh! you talk English, do ye? Waal, the only English-talkin' party in this community is in the back room thar. Look-a-hyar, boss—I don't cotton to that Happy Harry—don't take no stock in him, nohow. He's just cleaned out the boys, an' I'll give him away to ye. When he heard you fellers a-comin', he jist bolted into that thar room. Ain't that so, boys?"

All assented.

"Go in thar, an' you'll drop on him like a thousand o' brick! I say, boss, don't forgit my share o' the reward."

"Forward march!" commanded the sergeant.

And tramp! tramp! tramp! they went into Short-an'-dirty's sanctuary!

The friendly miner slyly pulled the door to after them.

Then from that room proceeded Short-an'-dirty's war-whoop, followed by a wild commotion!

For the space of thirty seconds everything sailed! Then the door was burst open, and forth sallied three policemen with remnants of helmets and coats, and Short-an'-dirty fetching up the rear with a mop, screaming like a tiger-cat at every jump!

The miners cheered lustily while this interesting quartette flew about the saloon.

Watching their chance, the discomfited officers of the law rushed back into Short-an'-dirty's retreat and slammed the door in her face; and thus they "held the fort," in spite of her wildest efforts to get in at them, yelling:

"They're in thar alone with that poor dorg, Tige! Oh, luddy gracious! they'll tramp on his blessed body!"

But now from without came shriek after shriek, rending the air, and the sound of a horse's hoofs flying at break-neck speed by the saloon.

In a twinkling the Lone Hand emptied itself into the night.

"Good God! wa'n't that a woman's voice?"

CHAPTER XIX.

A MAD RIDE.

Down the road, dimly discernible in the darkness, was a figure flying as for dear life.

"It's a man!" cried one.

"The Englishman, most likely."

"But thar's a woman on ahead," said a man who now came up, out of breath with running.

"I knowed that was a woman's scream."

"I tried to stop her up the road; but Lord! I thought that thar hoss would jump out o' his skin! The leetle one stuck on like a wood-tick, an' went sizzlin' by hyar, when the gent come

from behind the house an' took arter her on the keen jump."

"But who's the woman critter? Not the Rose?"

"Is thar anybody else o' the petticoat brigade in this hyar community what's likely to ride a-hossback?"

"Gentlemen! gentlemen! what is all this about?" asked Judge Stubbs, who, not being the spryest on foot, had just succeeded in making his way from the saloon.

"The Rose is run away with on the parson's bay hoss."

"Miss Evans run away with and you all stand hyar like a lot of—Waal! waal! is nothing to be done to rescue her from perhaps a frightful death? She may be thrown from her horse and killed! Is *this* the way the men of Poker Pocket look after their women? Get me a horse! I'll shame you all!"

But there was no horse to be had, and as quick as the miners found out that "The Rose" was in danger, many of them rushed off promptly enough on foot.

And now a new character appeared on the scene—a man whose clerical dress showed that he must be the "parson," whose horse was said to have run away with the Rose of Poker Pocket.

He was a small man, yet with a full beard, which contrasted oddly with his high-pitched, falsetto voice.

He spoke with a nasal twang, and an affected, ministerial drawl.

"My dear brethren," he said, wringing his hands in apparent distress, "what is this calamity which has fallen upon us? Much I fear that I may be unwittingly the cause of untold suffering, if not death, to our beloved sister in the Lord, and bereavement to the mother, already sore afflicted in her widowhood—ah! May a kindly Providence avert this dread disaster!"

Arizona had recovered from the shock of his fall in time to be among the first who emerged from the saloon, and now stood among the group that lingered before the Lone Hand.

Looking hard at the minister, he asked:

"Did you lend your horse to the young lady?"

"To my now unavailing regret, I did," replied the divine, humbly. "I have always esteemed it a pleasure to contribute in every way possible to the enjoyment of one cut off from association with her own sex, and cast among the trials and dangers of a mining-camp—ah! Alas! I never dreamed of danger in an animal which has always seemed manageable."

"Hold on, boys! Hyar comes her mother! Fer God's sake! don't give it away that anything's up?"

But the warning came too late.

A poor dumb creature, her face hidden by a hood and veil, came up, wringing her hands and appealing to the crowd with inarticulate cries of distress.

"Ah! sister Evans," said the minister, "do not give way, I beg of you! We are all in the hands of the Lord, without whom not a sparrow falls—ah! Whatever be permits is for the best. Let us hope and pray that He will withhold the chastening hand from one on whom the cross of affliction already bears heavily."

The woman sighed and moaned, and clung to the minister's hand.

"Don't take on, ma'am," said Judge Stubbs, stepping up to her. "Everything has been and will be done that can be. A dozen brave men have flown to the rescue, and will no doubt report progress presently."

Meanwhile, 'Appy 'Arry, having escaped from Short-an'-dirty's back window, had mounted his horse just in time to be in readiness to go in pursuit of the flying figure that sped through the darkness with such startling screams.

By the light from the saloon window, he saw a horse with the bit in his teeth, a vicious gleam in his eyes, and his ears laid close back to his head.

As he ran, he kicked his heels wildly in the air and screamed with pain or rage.

On his back was a lovely girl, not more than eighteen, at furthest, with ghastly, fear-drawn face, and fair hair streaming in the wind.

She clung in frantic terror to the saddle while shriek after shriek went up from her ashen lips.

'Appy 'Arry was well mounted, and giving his horse the rein, he urged him with voice and heel.

So began a wild chase!

Would the rescuer overtake the beautiful girl in time to save her; or would she be hurled to death from the back of her unmanageable steed?

Into the darkness they rushed, down the mountain road, which was thickly beset with dangers.

Here a boulder might have fallen from a cliff, to lie a fatal stumbling-block hidden by the darkness; yonder a land-slide might block the way; further on a gully might have been worn in the road by the last rain, a step into which might throw horse and rider, and break the neck of one or both; while at any point the sharp angles of the road might hurl the heedless racer against the face of a bluff or over a precipice!

But gradually 'Appy 'Arry's fleet horse forged ahead, until he was in danger from the flying heels of the runaway.

Now straining their iron thaws, they ran neck and neck.

The girl had stopped screaming, now that succor was at hand, and rode with set teeth and bated breath.

"Look out!" cautioned 'Appy 'Arry. "If your 'oss shies, I will catch you."

Now came the critical moment, with life and death in the balance!

With a last look ahead, to see if there were any dangers close at hand, 'Appy 'Arry gave his whole attention to the horse he meant to conquer.

A last urging of his faithful steed, and he was far enough ahead to bend forward and reach to grasp the bit of the runaway.

Seeing himself passed, the vicious animal suddenly snapped with his teeth, and nearly caught 'Appy 'Arry's hand, but the event was fortunate, for it released the bit and the next instant he was being curbed with a hand of iron.

Now ensued a terrible struggle.

His onward course checked, the horse seemed to go fairly mad.

He reared and plunged and kicked and bit and screamed with fury.

The very devil seemed to possess him!

Every moment threatened to see his fair rider thrown over his head, to be bruised and mangled on the rocky road.

It was wonderful how the girl retained her seat.

But this was not the first horse, by any means that the Rose of Poker Pocket had seen; and, her first terror allayed, she was watching her opportunity.

There was an instant in which the horse seemed to be gathering his forces for a renewed struggle; and in that instant the Rose leaped off and alighted on her feet, unhurt.

"Bravo! bravo!" cried 'Appy 'Arry, in keen admiration.

But, strange to say, the horse, late so frantic, suddenly became quite tractable, save a slight restlessness which might be the remains of his recent intense excitement.

"Hare you 'urt?" asked 'Appy 'Arry, dismounting.

"Not the least," replied the girl, in a sweet voice, somewhat quavering, of course.

"Let me congratulate you! You 'ave 'ad a terrible ride. If you will mount my 'oss—do you feel strong enough?—I will take charge of this fellow; and we shall be hable to relieve the hanxiety of your friends in a few minutes."

"If you feel confident of being able to manage my horse—I don't know what can have got into him—I think I can ride yours."

"Hall right! I'll change the saddles in a jiffy."

The girl laughed.

"No need of that. You see that mine is a gentleman's saddle. The horse was lent me by the Rev. Mr. Pillsbury."

"'E haught to be careful 'ow 'e lends such a vicious hanimal to a lady."

"But I've ridden him before; and he never seemed unmanageable."

And lightly she sprung from 'Appy 'Arry's hand to the back of her new horse."

'Appy 'Arry leaped into the saddle of the late runaway, and—

Away he shot like an arrow, on a return over the road he had come at the same mad pace!

The Rose of Poker Pocket stared in dismay after her vanishing rescuer.

What had got into that strange horse!

CHAPTER XX.

REVELATION—DENUNCIATION!

"HYAR she comes ag'in on the back track! (Stop 'er, boys!—stop 'er!)"

"Look out! The devil's in the beast!"

"Hi! Hi!"

"By the eternal! he's down!"

The horse had ridden through the crowd that attempted to oppose his passage; hurling one man to the ground.

"But, did you see?—it wa'n't the gal, at all!"

"No; it was a man, fur a fact."

"And that Englisher."

"But it was the parson's hoss. I'd know him among a thousand."

"Whar in thunder did he git the parson's boss?—an' whar's the gal?"

"That's a downer. I pass!"

"Eh? What's this?"

"The gal, fur rocks!"

"Hurray! hurray! Raise 'er, boys! The Rose is safe! Hip! hip!"

"HURRAY! HURRAY! HURRAY!"

You had better believe the rocks rung with the lusty shouts!

And when the Rose came up, she explained the strange proceeding; and the men formed in procession about her, like a body-guard, and so escorted her back to the Lone Hand at a double-quick.

Meanwhile, on his crazy horse, 'Appy 'Arry had charged down upon the crowd before the Lone Hand Saloon.

Some scattered with cries of warning; but Arizona sprung before the maddened animal, and his iron hand curbed his wild flight.

As before, the horse screamed and bit and kicked, until 'Appy 'Arry leaped from his back, when he became tolerably quiescent.

"Now look out fur a tornader! He'll mount that Englisher!" muttered one of the miners.

But instead of renewing the hostility between them, Arizona said:

"You downed me fair and square, and there I'm content to let the matter rest for the present, as I've got bigger business on hand. But I won't answer for the future. I may come for you again."

"Hall right, sir, said 'Appy 'Arry, carelessly. "I'll 'old myself at your service whenever you say the word."

But from the Lone Hand rushed a creature wild with passion.

"I've been robbed! I've been robbed! Whar's the leetle British scalawag what's played roots on Short-an'-dirty! Trot out the sneakin' varmint until I mount him! I'll show him a Yankee trick woth two of his Johnny Bull games. Wait till I caterwamptiously chaw his year fur 'im! Whar is the galoot?"

And just as 'Appy 'Arry turned, the virago hurled herself upon him, tooth and nail.

For a moment there was a mad scuffle, while Short-an'-dirty's screams cut the air shrilly.

Then her petticoats fluttered like sails in a hurricane, while her body went through some sort of evolution—nobody knew whether it was a somerset, or just what—and she was discovered seated on the ground, with her hands held firmly behind by her English conqueror.

"He downed Arizona, an' now he's whipped Short-an'-dirty!" muttered a miner, in a sort of awe.

As for Short-an'-dirty, her tussle with 'Appy 'Arry had left her breathless and dazed.

In that moment of silence, 'Appy 'Arry said:

"Now, be reasonable, woman. I 'ave no desire to wrong you hout of a cent. My flight from your saloon was— Good Lord!"

Without fin shing, he dropped her hands, and darted away in the darkness.

From round the corner of the house came the command:

"Steady, men! Heyes right! March!"

And tramp! tramp! came the London police, shoulder to shoulder, and necks as stiff as if they had taken a sudden cold in them.

As before, the Henglish Habsentee was not "hon 'and!"

Then Short-an'-dirty "went for" those devoted officers of justice.

"He's a countryman of yours, and you'll have to foot the bill!" she shouted; and pouncing upon the unhappy sergeant, she captured him and dragged him into the saloon to hold him as hostage.

Meanwhile, Arizona had been quieting the horse of the Rev. Mr. Pillsbury.

While patting and smoothing the reeking hide of the animal, he slid his hand under the saddle, and drew forth, as he had expected, a thorn whose sharp point galled the horse's tender flesh and drove him distracted the moment there was any weight in the saddle.

Of this he said nothing to the crowd, who were yelling themselves hoarse over the safe return of the Rose; but presenting the thorn to the Rev. Mr. Pillsbury, he said:—

"You're an infernal fraud! What interest have you in breaking the neck of that girl?"

"I? I? I do not understand you, sir!" stammered the minister.

"Oh, yes you do!" persisted Arizona. "You put that thorn under the saddle for the express purpose of goading the horse to run away, in the hope that the girl might be killed—by accident!—you pious humbug! I'll see you later!"

"Sir! Sir! Dare you accuse a minister of the Gospel—"

But Arizona had turned on his heel to give his whole attention to the Rose of Poker Pocket, who was just dismounting from his horse.

At sight of her he started violently.

"Good Heavens! can it be?" he cried.

Then, after a nearer view:

"By all that's fortunate! it is—the bonny Claire! At last! at last!"

His face glowed with unholy triumph.

All unconscious the girl had sprung into the arms of her mother.

The dumb woman clasped her child in her arms and kissed her, without lifting her veil.

"My beautiful Claire!" repeated Arizona.

"Then who is this mother? Her mother died years ago. And why this mystery of a veil?—and dumb! By Jove I have it! Aha! aha! They laugh best who laugh last! Now it is my turn! Perhaps the game's not played out yet!"

Strange to say, another had been affected very similarly to Arizona.

Creeping back in the darkness, on discovering that Short-an'-dirty had demoralized the representatives of British justice by capturing their leader, 'Appy 'Arry was also gazing on mother and daughter, and muttering:

"That's surely the girl. Then the hother must be— 'Ello!"

His sudden ejaculation was caused by an unexpected development.

The Rev. Mr. Pillsbury stepped forward, and addressing Miss Evans gravely, as she was released from her mother's arms, said:

"I cannot express my regret at the danger to which I have unwittingly exposed you. Thanks to an all-merciful Providence you are returned to us again, safe from harm."

"Don't mention the danger," said the generous girl. "Of course, it wasn't your fault."

But just here came the interruption which had checked 'Appy 'Arry's speculations.

"There's no time like the present!" muttered Arizona; and stepping forward, he confronted the dumb mother of the Rose of Poker Pocket.

"Gentlemen," he cried aloud, "I believe I have a bone to pick with this mysterious female! Behold how easy a thing it is to be humbugged!"

And with a dexterous twitch, he jerked hood and veil from the head of—ALF CHESWICK!

With a derisive laugh, he flourished his trophies above his head; but suddenly the fist of the whilom dumb woman shot forth, and the iron-hearted adventurer went to grass!

Alf Cheswick planted his foot on the breast of his fallen foe and glared about like a lion at bay.

Claire screamed and clung to her husband.

The miners stood aghast.

"What is all this, my dear colonel?" queried Judge Stubbs in bewilderment. "By Jove, sir! I don't understand it at all!"

"The sloy divil! Is it a man, I dunno?" cried Patsy. "Och, murther! luck at the thricks av that purty crayther!—will yez now? It's a foin mother she has! There's the b'atin' o' the divil in their ways—all o' thim!"

And at this critical moment the Rev. Mr. Pillsbury stepped forward and said:

"Men, bind that fallen ruffian! I denounce him as the outlaw—*Captain Bland!*"

With a howl, Poker Pocket sprang forward as one man; and, struggling vainly to rise, the Iron Heart was pinned once more to the ground.

CHAPTER XXI.

BOB BOLTON IN AT THE DEATH.

BRANDED as a murderer and hopeless of being able to prove his innocence, Alf Cheswick had resolved to cast every other consideration to the winds and cleave to his young wife, whom he loved before all things else on earth. He believed that he had killed Patent-leather Joe, and to Claire he explained the feud between them which seemed to justify the act of vengeance—how that man had murdered his father, driven his mother insane, come within an ace of wrecking the life happiness of his sister, and, last had sought to rob him of his wife!

But, knowing that he had killed one man, would Claire ever believe that he was innocent of her father's murder? He dared not run the risk! He would fly with her! She should never hear the accusation from mortal lips! They fled, and buried themselves in the mountains, Claire never knowing even that her father was dead.

But one day Alf heard of Sheriff Bob Bolton's pledge to hunt the murderer of old Stephen Rensalier to the death.

"He let me escape from the mob, trusting in his ability to recapture me, and take me before a court of law," was poor Alf's fatal mistake. "It was a mere matter of pride with him. It would be a feather in his cap, to so circumvent Judge Lynch in favor of the regularly constituted authorities."

Then it was that he adopted the disguise in which we have found him at Poker Pocket, making Claire believe that he dreaded pursuit on account of the slaying of Patent-leather Joe. At any cost he would keep his wife, and keep her in ignorance of that terrible accusation.

Now, his mask torn away, he feared—first, that the charge against him would be made in Claire's hearing; second, that he would be dragged off to trial and hanged.

So engrossed was he with these apprehensions, that he forgot to wonder at the reappearance of his old foe, alive and well—indeed, he did not realize that it was he until afterward—and thought only of escape with Claire.

But another influence was at work. The Rev. Mr. Pillsbury knew that if Poker Pocket got the idea that Arizona was Captain Bland, no one would listen to any counter charge that Arizona might wish to bring against the minister; so, in self-defense, he took the initiative.

In a trice Arizona was bound and helpless.

Then Judge Stubbs came "to the fore."

"Gentlemen," he said, "this hyer thing has turned out about as I expected. I always said that sooner or later I'd have to hang our friend hyer. He's carried things with a pretty high hand; but every dog has his day."

"Some gentleman get the rope ready while we go on with the trial."

There seemed to be a universal desire to act as hangman; and Poker Pocket was about to rush off in a body for the rope, when the judge interfered.

"Don't all go at once, gentlemen. We'll want a dozen unprejudiced men for jurors. The thing's got to be put through on the square."

Do you think that any of the good citizens of Poker Pocket thought themselves unfitted for jurors on the score of prejudice? They'd scorn the idea.

At any rate, no one was prejudiced in favor of the prisoner. They'd give him the benefit of the doubt fast enough? That is to say—if there was any doubt of his being Captain Bland, they would hang him on general principles.

So, in lieu of a prisoner's dock, Arizona was made to stand on a barrel beneath the projecting limb of a cottonwood; a slight stretch of the imagination metamorphosed a candle-box into a judge's bench; and, while the trial progressed, an active man shinned up the cottonwood and dangled the noose conveniently near the prisoner's head, so that no time need be lost when the verdict had been rendered.

Arizona proved his right to the title of the Iron Heart.

He never deigned so much as a glance in search of his confederates, but stood like a man of rock.

However, they were mindful of his strait.

But let us note a strange proceeding which took place before they could act.

'Appy 'Arry had entered the Lone Hand Saloon and paid his footing on the square.

Thereupon Short-an'-dirty had released her hostage of war.

A minute later 'Appy 'Arry and the self-styled London police were in amicable consultation behind the saloon!

"He's our man, beyond question," said 'Appy 'Arry; and now, strange to relate, there was no trace of the cockney in his articulation, but, on the contrary, the thoroughly American accents of Sheriff Bob Bolton! "I had his pistols in hand long enough to see that they were cut with the same initials—'P. J.'—and by the same hand as this pretty rib-tickler!"

And he displayed the bowie-knife which he had picked up in Stephen Rensalier's garden on the morning of the murder.

"But the question is whether we can take him out of this camp. As long as the boys are bound to hang him as a road-agent, they would laugh at the idea of giving him up to the slow and *uncertain* grind of a court, to be tried for a murder a year old. Our only show is to lay low and not show our hands yet. There may be a slip in this hanging—the other was jest as near it as he is and got off—and we may have a chance to come for him ag'in."

"Speakin' of the other one," suggested the sergeant, and his crusty old voice was now quite pleasant, and he had lost his stiffness, as had also the members of his squad, "while we're waitin' fur something to turn up, why can't we tell the young feller that his innocence has been proved by a perfect *alibi*, and that that million is gettin' moldy waitin' fur some one to turn it over?"

"A capital idea! We'll act on it," assented Sheriff Bob Bolton. "That pretty little woman has been run from copse to cover long enough! I saw the pair slip into that cabin over yonder just after the mob nabbed Patent-leather Joe. No doubt they are getting ready to break cover and run for it again."

Paying no heed to the trial which was in progress, the disguised officers glided over to the cabin where the Rose of Poker Pocket and her fugitive husband had lived unsuspected.

A knock at the door. No answer! Another knock. Still unbroken silence!

"They're laying low. Try the door."

It yielded to the touch.

Within the cabin all was confusion. The drawers of a rude bureau stood open, and their contents had evidently been tumbled about, some of them lying on the floor. But the back door stood wide open. The birds had flown!

"That's the way they went," cried Bob Bolton. "Come on, men! We may overtake them. Thar's no use leaving them to fly from shadows."

But as they emerged from the cabin strange sounds reached their ears.

"Great Heavens! what's this?"

CHAPTER XXII.

CAPTURING A TOWN.

Down the road at a furious gallop came a band of armed men.

In a twinkling they had surrounded the 'court' before the Lone Hand Saloon!

Every man jack of them wore a black mask!

"Hands up! Surrender!" shouted the leader, brandishing a brace of revolvers. "We take possession of this town."

"Captain Bland! Captain Bland!" passed from lip to lip.

Poker Pocket yielded gracefully to the fortunes of war.

In the confusion that ensued Arizona escaped, nobody knew when or how.

Five minutes later he reappeared in command of the band of outlaws; and no one could see through his black mask to distinguish him from the leader under whom they had swept down upon the town.

The Brothers of the Laramie Hills helped

themselves to whatever they saw in Poker Pocket that pleased their fancy; and the miners, overawed, were forced to look on at their own spoliation.

But this was only a blind.

Arizona had instantly instituted a search for Alf Cheswick and his wife.

As 'Appy 'Arry had done, he found their cabin empty.

The robber chief sent out men to scour the vicinity; but neither that night nor the following day were the fugitives found.

'Appy 'Arry and the London police had also mysteriously disappeared.

But one prisoner was brought in—the Rev. Mr. Pillsbury?—and, what do you think?—*minus his disguise!*

At sight of the minister, Arizona, thrown off his guard, cried:

"Great heavens! *you*, Hortense?"

And the arch-plotter, for it was indeed she, exclaimed in return:

"My brother Andrew! *Can it be?*"

"Whom you came within an ace of hanging, my dear!"

"But how could I know it was you?"

"True. I bear you no malice. But I drop to your little game. Of course you are still after uncle Steve's million?"

"What do you know about it?"

"All about it, my dear sister! Of course, you *did* lend the horse to facilitate tardy nature?"

"Well, I suppose there is no use in denying it."

"None whatever. And now, sister mine, we have both made a mistake. In the past we have been fighting against each other. Now we must strike hands. In union there is strength!"

"Agreed—share and share alike!" consented Hortense; and they clasped hands.

They had not given over the fight for the million, and don't you forget it!

On the following day they quit Poker Pocket.

That night, a strange thing took place in the cabin lately tenanted by the Rose of Poker Pocket.

A board in one corner of the floor rose cautiously; and after an interval a head was thrust forth.

A moment of listening, and the body followed the head; after which another figure emerged.

Presently the two crept from the cabin and disappeared in the darkness.

Some time afterward a slightly disarranged board led to the discovery of a retreat beneath the floor of the cabin, and then Poker Pocket knew how the Rose had eluded the pursuit of her enemy.

But far away she was clasped close in the arms of her husband, happy in their mutual love, though neither knew that this far, at least, they were victors in the game with—

"A MILLION IN THE POT!"

And now, young friends, if you have had your money's worth in this first hand in—

PATENT-LEATHER JOE'S BIG GAME, perhaps you will be on hand when the cards go round again, with Arizona of the Iron Heart and Hortense Rensalier in partnership, and Sheriff Bob Bolton in the role of the little joker!

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